THE ETERNAL DUNGEON

Dusk Peterson

THE ETERNAL DUNGEON
a Turn-of-the-Century Toughs omnibus of historical fantasy novels
Dusk Peterson

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The Eternal Dungeon contains all the current stories in the ongoing Eternal Dungeon series. Readers' feedback is welcome and will be taken into account in the preparation of future editions of this e-book.

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DEDICATION

To Jo/e Noakes.
He knows why.

CONTENTS

=== *Rebirth* ===

In the Queendom of Yclau lies an underground royal prison that embraces the worst of the past and the best of the future. The Eternal Dungeon is old-fashioned in its equipment and ahead of its time in its treatment of prisoners, seeking to put their best welfare above all else. Torture is part of the process of assisting the prisoners.

The High Seeker, Layle Smith, embodies this contradictory institution: a man of deadly impulses, the head torturer binds himself strictly by the dungeon's code of conduct. His efforts to maintain this delicate balance are altered, though, by the introduction into his life of Elsdon Taylor, a vulnerable prisoner who is coming to terms with his own darkness.

¶ Novel: 130,000 words.

Rebirth 1: The Breaking. The prisoner knew that the Eternal Dungeon was a place where suspected criminals were broken by torture, and he was prepared to hold out against any methods used against him – except the method he could not anticipate.

Rebirth 2: Love and Betrayal. As a torturer learns the art of questioning prisoners, he discovers that the word "love" can have a darker meaning than he had supposed.

Rebirth 3: First Time. One of them seeks to heal from abuse. The other one dreams of abusing. Now they're in love.

Rebirth 4: In Training. Unexpected danger reveals to a young torturer the dark mystery of his mentor's past – as well as unpleasant revelations about himself.

Rebirth 5: As a Seeker. If the High Seeker wants something, no power in life or death will hold him from taking it. What he wants now has brought danger to the Eternal Dungeon.

Rebirth 6: Tops and Sops. The torturer was young, inexperienced, and lacking in knowledge of the world. The prisoner was tough, worldlywise, and had an infallible plan that would give him escape from this place. So why did the prisoner feel as though the torturer had the edge?

Rebirth: Historical Note.

=== Transformation ===

The Eternal Dungeon, a royal prison where criminals are transformed, has lost its leadership. The duty of returning the dungeon to normal falls on two Seekers (torturers) who are already burdened with their own problems. One Seeker is struggling to understand why an old love affair continues to gnaw at him. The other Seeker is faced with his greatest challenge: whether to risk that which is most precious to him in order to save his own abuser.

¶ Novel: 110,000 words.

Transformation 1: Deception. The Eternal Dungeon is no longer in danger. Unless, that is, something unexpected should happen.

Transformation 2: Twists and Turns. Only the loyal presence of one man has kept him alive. Now that man's loyalty is about to be tested.

Transformation 3: A Prisoner Has Need. A cold-hearted murderer has been brought to the Eternal Dungeon, one who must be dealt with through firmness and perhaps harshness. Too bad he's twelve.

Transformation 4: The Consultation. He has come from the Eternal Dungeon to offer his services to another prison's head torturer. The only trouble is that the head torturer likes him too much.

Transformation: Historical Note.

=== The Balance ===

The workers in the Eternal Dungeon have always expressed contempt toward the Hidden Dungeon in the neighboring kingdom of Vovim, whose torturers abuse prisoners without restraint. But the balance between mercy and hell is not so clear as might be thought in either dungeon, and now that balance is about to tip. Only the strength of love and integrity will determine the paths of two Seekers whose fortunes are bound together.

¶ Novel: 70,000 words.

The Balance 1: Truth and Lies. When you're a prisoner, having a torturer who's mad can be an advantage. Or maybe not.

The Balance 2: Barbarians. Vovim was renowned for its strong monarchy, for its love of the theater, and for its skill in the art of torture. In other words, it had all the qualities needed to become a civilized nation. But would anyone be willing to defy Vovim's tyrannical king? And if they did, would they survive?

The Balance 3: Hidden. He had been given the kindest, gentlest torturer in the dungeon. The prisoner was left with only one hope: that he could teach his torturer how to be cruel.

The Balance 4: Death Watch. Death lurks everywhere in the Eternal Dungeon . . . even in a Seeker's bedroom.

=== *On Guard* ===

The ties forged between the noble-minded Eternal Dungeon and the abusive Hidden Dungeon have set off an unpredictable chain of horrific events, in which the love between two Seekers (torturers) will be tested to the straining point. Caught in the middle of the struggle are Barrett Boyd and Seward Sobel, two loyal guards who will find themselves questioning their most fundamental beliefs about the Eternal Dungeon's ideals.

¶ Novel: 90,000 words.

On Guard: Prologue. "The junior Seeker stood in the entrance, awaiting death."

On Guard 1: Promotion. "'Has it occurred to you to wonder what would happen to this dungeon if their stubbornness came into conflict?'"

On Guard 2: Protection. "'Do you recall the orders that you were given when you were first assigned to guard him?'"

On Guard 3: Searching. "The prisoner was meek and gentle and very, very afraid."

On Guard 4: Appointment. "He was thinking to himself that diligence ought to be rewarded."

On Guard 5: Mediation. "'Shall we allow criminals to roam the streets at will because we're afraid to take the chance of harming an innocent prisoner?'"

On Guard 6: Advice. "A great man and his faithful guard – that was the tale of which ballads were sung."

On Guard 7: Judgment. "He knew at once that something was wrong."

On Guard 8: Testing. "'Nervous?'"

On Guard 9: Decision. "His mind was focussed, his goal clear."

On Guard: Epilogue. "'He's your friend, isn't he?'"

On Guard: Historical Note.

=== *Side stories* ===

The Unanswered Question. No weapons, no allies, and no guarantees that he will survive the test.

A 2009 holiday gift story for Dusk Peterson's readers. Includes major spoilers for *Rebirth*.

¶ Novella: 36,000 words.

=== *Upcoming fiction* ===

Sweet Blood (excerpt). A preview of the next *Eternal Dungeon* novel. The excerpt includes major spoilers for the end of *On Guard*.

=== *Back matter* ===

Credits.

Publication history.

Author's website, blog, e-mail list, and contact information.

***Turn-of-the-Century Toughs* e-books**.

Other e-books by Dusk Peterson.

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=== *Rebirth* ===

> Then straightaway Love came toward me with quick steps, and as he came he cried out: "Vassal, you are taken. There is no chance for escape or struggle. Surrender without making any resistance. . . ."
>
> I replied simply, "Sir, I surrender willingly, and I shall never defend myself against you. May it never please God for me even to think of ever resisting you, for to do so is neither right nor reasonable. You may do with me as you wish, hang me or kill me. I know very well that I cannot change things, for my life is in your hand. Only through your will can I live until tomorrow, and, since I shall never have joy and health from any other, I await them from you. If your hand, which has wounded me, does not give me a remedy, if you wish to make me your prisoner or if you do not deign to do so, I shall not count myself deceived. . . ."
>
> With these words, I wanted to kiss his foot, but he took me by the hand and said, "I love you very much and hold you in esteem for the way you have replied here. Such a reply never came from a lowborn fellow with poor training. Moreover, you have won so much that, for your benefit, I want you to do homage to me from now on: You will kiss me on my mouth, which no base fellow touches. I do not allow any common man, any butcher, to touch it; anyone whom I take thus as my man must be courteous and open. Serving me is, without fail, painful and burdensome . . ."
>
> Immediately, with joined hands, I became his man.
>
> —Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun: *The Romance of the Rose* (*Roman de la Rose*, 1230-1275), as translated by Charles Dahlberg.

Rebirth 1
THE BREAKING

The year 355, the fourth month.

More than one student of psychology has been shocked to learn that the origin of our nation's superb system of counselling and "transformation therapy" lies in the whips and racks once used in a dark chamber of torture.

Of course, no psychologist today would countenance some of the methods that were used in the Eternal Dungeon. But modern-day psychologists who react with horror at the idea that their profession's roots lie in this place have not taken into account the historical context of the Eternal Dungeon. For what occurred in places like this during the preceding centuries was indeed beyond any measure of defense: a heartless system designed to destroy prisoners and satisfy the basest desires of the men who tortured them.

The Eternal Dungeon represented a step forward in the progress of civilization, largely because of its code book, a product of several generations of foresightful torturers who saw that the application of pain might not be the only means used to bring about a change in the criminal's character. The introduction of the *Code of Seeking* marks the birth of the Eternal Dungeon, whose emphasis was on transformation rather than destruction, for the Code's carefully delineated rules required the torturers to place the best interests of the prisoners first. However often this principle may have lapsed, the principle did at least exist, and from this strange birthplace sprang, in due time, the modern psychological movement.

The Eternal Dungeon's Golden Age – a phrase I use with no intention at irony – came at the time that the torturers first adopted the term "Seeker" to refer to themselves. Their leader – always the most skilled torturer of his generation – was in turn called the High Seeker.

The first of the Eternal Dungeon's High Seekers was also its most famous . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

They had passed through three checkpoints to reach this far. Even the guards serving as escort were beginning to look nervous, staring back at the lengthy, narrow passage they had travelled down, from the cavern's mouth. The prisoner they held in their grasp had turned so pale that observers might have wondered whether the young man would pitch head-forward down the remainder of the steep passage.

Several observers indeed stood below, though they could not be easily seen: they were half-hidden in the shadows at the bottom of the cavern that the prisoner and his escorts had been walking down. It was hard to tell how far the cavern reached, for where the passage stopped, the cavern widened. All that could be seen, within the narrow confines of the passage, was an entry hall that ended abruptly in a man-made wall. Against that wall, reaching up toward the ceiling, was an enormous tablet of slate with words scribbled upon it in chalk. In front of this formidable display of secretarial work was a desk occupied by a balding man with spectacles.

He was looking up at someone standing next to the desk, but the walls of the passage hid his companion. Only as the visitors reached the bottom of the passage did the other man come into view: he was dressed in a dark shirt, trousers, boots, and an old-fashioned belt, clothing little different from those worn by a thousand workmen in the world above. Only his face was different: a black hood covered everything but his eyes.

Seeing this, the prisoner came to an abrupt halt, then stumbled forward, pushed on by his escort. The movement caught the attention of the hooded man, and he looked over at the new arrivals. His eyes were a deep green, the color of the algae clinging to the rock walls.

The man at the desk took no notice of the interruption. He pushed a paper toward the hooded man and raised his voice slightly over the sound of dripping water. "Look at this, sir – why do these requests always arrive at the same time? Four rack rooms we have, and five Seekers have requested use of them."

The hooded man picked up the paper, glanced at it, and said, "Let me see the prisoners' records, please."

His voice was quiet, as were his movements as he reached out to take from the balding man a pile of bound documents that had been sitting on the desk. He leafed through them slowly, while the guards escorting the new prisoner, who had come to a halt before the desk, shuffled their feet impatiently. Finally he said, without looking up from the documents, "I deny Mr. Chapman's request. He can break his prisoner using the whip alone."

The balding man nodded, took back the documents, and finally acknowledged the existence of the new arrivals. "Well?" he said sharply.

"Sir, this is a prisoner transfer." The taller guard was the speaker; the shorter guard looked as though he was endeavoring to hide behind the prisoner.

The balding man ran his eye up and down the young prisoner, who had his hands clenched together in an effort to keep them from shaking. "I didn't think you were delivering to me our Queen," the Record-keeper said dryly. "Do you have the transfer papers?"

The shorter guard handed the papers over to the Record-keeper as the taller guard said, "It's a death-sentence case."

"You don't say," replied the Record-keeper, beginning to finger through the papers. "And here I thought our job was to question prisoners who stole children's slingshots."

The taller guard flushed; the shorter guard came perilously close to smiling. Then he looked over at the hooded man, and his expression sobered rapidly.

The prisoner barely noticed this exchange. His gaze was locked with that of the hooded man, who seemed content to allow the Record-keeper to handle this matter. After a moment, though, the hooded man broke his gaze from the young man and leaned over to take the records being proffered to him.

"You haven't submitted the previous prison's searching record," observed the Record-keeper.

The older guard cleared his throat and said, "No searching was done at our prison, sir. The victim's father—"

The Record-keeper sighed heavily. "Don't you people living in the lighted world ever learn your jobs? There must be a searching record, even if it only says why the searching failed to take place. . . . Oh, very well, I'll make one out myself."

He pulled forward a piece of paper, lifted a pen from where it stood in the inkwell, and looked up expectantly. "Name?"

"I'm Raol Merritt."

The Record-keeper sighed again. "Not your name, the prisoner's. I need the official spelling."

The taller guard flushed once more and spelled out the name. The Record-keeper wrote down the words so quickly that, by the time the guard had finished, the Record-keeper was already asking, "Who made the decision to proceed without a search?"

"The keeper of Parkside Prison, sir. The victim's father—" He stopped abruptly as the Record-keeper put up his hand. The guard waited as the balding man finished writing and looked up again.

"Go on," the latter said. "The victim's father did what?"

"Requested the prisoner's transfer here, sir. Based on his knowledge of the prisoner, he believed that a searching by lesser means would be unsuccessful."

The hooded man, who had been examining the transfer papers all this while, looked up now, but said nothing.

"The victim's father is acquainted with the prisoner, then?" said the Record-keeper, leaning over to take the records back from the hooded man.

"Yes, sir. He's also the prisoner's father."

The Record-keeper paused in the midst of taking hold of the papers and raised his eyebrows.

The shorter guard, eager to take part in this exciting revelation, said, "You see, this vermin murdered his younger sister in cold blood—"

"Sir." It was the hooded man; his voice was as quiet as before. "You are in the Eternal Dungeon, and in the Eternal Dungeon, prisoners are treated with respect. They are not referred to as vermin."

The shorter guard swallowed. "Yes, sir. If you say so, sir. I mean, you're in charge—"

He stopped as the older guard reached over and punched him in the ribs. The hooded man looked at the Record-keeper, who had turned to stare at the ceiling-high tablet. This, on close inspection, could be seen to be covered with names and numbers. "Assign the prisoner to me, Mr. Aaron," the hooded man said.

The Record-keeper turned back in surprise. "You, sir? But you've just completed four days in a rack room. You're entitled to a day off. "

"This prisoner deserves special treatment." The hooded man looked over at the young man again.

Elsdon had already begun to shiver. He told himself that it was because of the coldness of the cavern, but in fact the dungeon was not nearly as cold as he had thought it would be. It seemed that the tales about the iciness of the dungeon were false. Beneath his feet was not the cave ground but an artificial floor that kept away the chill of the rock. The place looked less like a cave than a house of business, built to house the latest machinery.

Machinery of all sorts. Elsdon looked again at the giant tablet with its names. Nearly all of the names had been neatly crossed out.

"Right, we have the information we need now. You can leave him with us. Just be sure you bring the proper transfer records next time you deliver a prisoner." The Record-keeper's expression suggested that, if his advice was ignored, the consequences for the guards would be dire.

The guards were already sliding away, eager to be gone. They came to an abrupt halt, though, as the hooded man said, "Before you go . . . Why is the prisoner unbound?"

The taller guard appeared distinctly uncomfortable. It was clear that he expected to be arrested at any moment for dereliction of duty. "The keeper of Parkside Prison made that decision, sir. We had some difficulty binding the prisoner, and as the prisoner had been otherwise cooperative, our keeper believed it would be safe to escort him here unbound."

The hooded man nodded. He turned away from the Parkside Prison guards and said, "Mr. Sobel, there is no need to bind the prisoner unless he causes trouble."

Elsdon, who had been glorying momentarily in the feeling of being unrestrained by guards or cells for the first time in two days, twisted to look behind him. Out of the shadows stepped two new guards.

They were not hooded like the man nearby. They looked very much like the guards who were hurrying back up the steps, already far enough away to be challenged at the lowest of the three checkpoints. The new guards wore grey uniforms and had sheathed daggers at their right hips; each also had a whip curled into a circle at the left hip. One of the guards was holding something black in his hands. As he reached Elsdon, he brought the object down over Elsdon's head without preliminary.

Elsdon screamed. He reached up with his hands to tear off the cloth blinding him, only to have his hands caught and held – he began to struggle frantically against the guard who was holding his hands. After his initial scream, he struggled in silence. He heard the hooded man behind him say something in an unperturbed voice, and then his hands were released and the cloth lifted from his head.

He could see, now that the cloth was removed, that it was a hood very much like the one worn by the man nearby, except that it had no eye-holes. He closed his eyes, trying to regain his breath. Beside him, the younger of the two guards took hold of his arm. He shuddered then but did not pull away; he was bracing himself for the return of the hood.

The hooded man spoke again, and the guard's hand dropped away. Elsdon opened his eyes to see that the hooded man was watching him with a steady gaze.

"Mr. Taylor," he said, "will you obey the guards?"

Elsdon had to resist the impulse to turn and look for his father. It was the first time anyone had addressed him by his adult title. Always he had been "Elsdon" or, to his father, "son." He had not expected such formality in this place, but perhaps it was one of the methods used to cut prisoners off from their ordinary lives.

"Yes, sir," he replied breathlessly. "I just— I mean, yes." He tensed, biting his lip to keep himself from screaming this time.

The hooded man nodded and turned to the older guard, saying, "Mr. Sobel."

The older guard, who could apparently be trusted to assess the situation without need for instruction, folded the cloth and placed it in his jacket side-pocket. "I would ask that you keep your eyes shut, sir," he told Elsdon.

Elsdon did so. He remembered, now that the crisis was over, that prisoners to be hanged were hooded first. He tried to decide whether it would be better or worse to be hanged now rather than be taken away to the cell awaiting him.

It seemed, though, that he had no choice. "Breaking Cell 4," the Record-keeper said briskly. "And for love of the Code, Mr. Sobel, turn in a complete report this time!"

"Will do," said the older guard in a light manner. Then his voice took on another tone as he leaned over to Elsdon. "You are not to speak until we arrive at the cell. If you speak, you will be punished. Do you understand?"

Elsdon hoped that his face did not reveal what the rapid beating of his heart did. Nodding, he felt a hand push his back. He began stumbling forward. Behind him, the Record-keeper was addressing the hooded man again.

A door creaked on its hinges in front of Elsdon; then, as he continued to walk forward, he heard the same door creaking behind him. The air had changed. Before, it had held the scent of wet rocks; now it had a closed, musty smell. The sound of dripping water had disappeared as well, and he could no longer hear the echo of footsteps against the cavern wall. The

place he was travelling through was chilly and as silent as death, but for the distant sound of a man sobbing. He shuddered again but he did not pause in his step, fearing that, if he did, the younger guard would take hold of him once more. Then he felt a hand hold him indeed, but it touched him only lightly; he guessed that it must belong to the older guard, Mr. Sobel. Feeling the instruction that the touch conveyed, he halted.

Metal jingled nearby, then scraped. He heard the screech of another pair of door-hinges. Without waiting to be pushed, he walked into the destiny that awaited him.

The room was small. He was not sure how he knew this, for his eyes were still shut. Perhaps it had to do with the way his footsteps sounded upon the floor. The room was warm as well, warmer than the dungeon's entry hall had been, and light danced against his eyelids. He tried not to think what the purpose of the fire might be.

Next to him, Mr. Sobel said, "You may open your eyes, Mr. Taylor."

He had no desire to do so; it would be easier to face what came next if he did not have to see it. But he guessed that the words were not an invitation but an instruction, so he let his eyelids rise.

The instruments of torture he had expected were not there. All that he could see was an ordinary prison cell, a better one than he had left. Whereas his old cell had housed two dozen prisoners, whom he had feared more than the guards, this cell was designed for a single man. The floor of his old cell had been made of dirt and straw that attracted vermin; this one was of flagstones. In his old cell, he had slept on the floor; here a low, body-length shelf graced the left wall, and it even had blankets, a pillow, and a thin mattress. His old cell had chains. He remembered that most of all, and so, no doubt, did all of the inhabitants of Parkside Prison, for he had kept the prisoners awake until midnight his first night, screaming his throat raw. His guards, who had been frustrated from taking action against him by the knowledge that his transfer to the Eternal Dungeon had already been arranged, had finally released him from his bonds. Thereafter, the keeper of Parkside Prison had commented dryly when he came to speak to Elsdon of his transfer, Elsdon had acted as a model prisoner.

He doubted he would be able to remain quiet here for long. He looked more closely at the cell, seeking some small sign of what would happen in the hours to come. A flash of metal caught his attention, but he quickly saw that the metal was no more than a collection of implements for his toiletry: a covered chamber-pot, a pitcher and bowl, and a set of cloths. It was far more than he had known at Parkside Prison. As for the fire . . . that was the oddest part of all. There was no fire in this place, not even a lamp. Instead, at the far end of the long, rectangular cell, the wall seemed translucent, like thick ice upon a pond, and beyond it was the dancing light he had seen behind his eyelids when he entered the cell. He stared at it, trying to ascertain the cause of the fire.

Behind him, Mr. Sobel said, "Now, then . . ." His hand fell upon Elsdon's shoulder.

Elsdon spun with the desperate haste of a man who has felt a dagger touch his back, and thrust away with his hands, propelling the guard into the left-hand corner against the wall that held the open cell door. Mr. Sobel's head met the wall with a crack, and his eyes turned up in his head.

Elsdon saw no more than this, for he was backing away, as hastily as he could, seeking refuge from what he had done. None was to be found; the cell was too small for a hiding place. He ended up in the right-hand corner next to the door, and it was there that the younger guard's whip reached him.

His breath gasped in at the bite of the lash, but his mind was scarcely on the burning line across his forearm. He had turned his head, half expecting to see another corpse lying motionless upon the ground. Vomit filled his mouth.

The whiplash came a second time, harder. He closed his eyes against the pain and waited for the remainder. He could not tell whether the younger guard wanted him on his knees or crying for mercy or sobbing out apologies.

He could never tell. That was the trouble.

"Mr. Urman!" Mr. Sobel's voice was reassuringly sharp. Elsdon opened his eyes and looked over to the corner opposite of him, where Mr. Sobel had

pushed himself away from the wall and was rubbing the back of his head. The older guard said to his companion, "There is no need to continue once the prisoner is subdued, Mr. Urman. You would be better off closing the door you left agape."

The younger guard looked over at the doorway, within easy reach of Elsdon, and his face went pink. Trailing his whip behind him, he moved hastily toward the door, which opened outwards.

"You may wait outside," Mr. Sobel told him. He was still rubbing the back of his head, and his face was paler than it had been before. As the door closed, he turned to Elsdon. With a rueful expression, he said, "He's in training. May I see your arm?"

Elsdon stared at him, but the guard did not move from where he stood, so Elsdon nodded and held out the arm that had two neat lines of blood across it. He was beginning to shake now, and he had to swallow the foulness that still filled his mouth.

Mr. Sobel misconstrued the cause of his strain, saying, "Those are nasty cuts. You may need to see the healer."

The guard's face remained pale, though he had let go of the back of his head in order to examine Elsdon's arm. Elsdon said hesitantly, unsure whether he would be believed, "I'm sorry."

Mr. Sobel, who had taken out a clean handkerchief from his pocket and was dabbing at Elsdon's wound, looked up. After the briefest of moments, a smile crept into the corners of his mouth. "It's my fault," the guard replied. "Unnecessary touching of a prisoner – the High Seeker would give me a hard beating if he'd witnessed that. Now, as I was saying before I became so careless . . . Water's in the corner there and will be replenished at mealtimes. If you run short, just knock on the cell door. Mr. Urman and I, or the guards who take the day shift, will be standing outside the cell at all times."

"Watching?" Elsdon blurted out. It seemed unlikely, given the solid nature of the door, but Mr. Sobel nodded and pointed to an eye-level hole in the door, barely more than a pinprick.

"Watching at intervals," he said. "Or full-time, if we should be ordered to do so. You won't know when we're watching, so I suggest that you not try anything creative in here."

Elsdon looked back at the cell, wondering what creative activities the previous prisoners had attempted. He could see no way to escape, even if such an idea had been on his mind. Aside from the watch-hole and the tiny gap between the door and the floor, the cell was completely enclosed, in a manner that began to make him feel uneasy. It was like being chained. . . . Thrusting the idea away hastily, before it should take effect upon him, he made himself think about the thick glass wall. There was something beyond it, some fire that was bringing light and warmth into this room. The feeling of imprisonment here was just an illusion, he told himself, knowing that he lied.

"Do you have any questions?" Mr. Sobel asked.

He had many questions, but he could not clear his throat to speak, for he had finally found what he was looking for. Almost invisible against the translucent wall hung a metal ring, at about the level his hands would be if he held them above his head. He had seen rings like that at Parkside Prison, and had seen them put to use.

Behind him, as quiet as a schoolmaster murmuring approval, a voice said, "Thank you, Mr. Sobel. I will answer any questions the prisoner has."

Elsdon turned slowly. The hooded man stood in the doorway. He was dressed as he had been before, unarmed but for the look in his eyes. He stepped away from the doorway as Mr. Sobel made his exit. Then, as the door shut behind the guard, he said, "Good evening, Mr. Taylor. I am your Seeker, Mr. Smith."

Elsdon made no reply. His eyes were searching the Seeker's belt, looking for a rope or a chain or any other sign of what was to take place here. His gaze jerked up, though, as the Seeker said, "Mr. Taylor, do you enjoy pain?"

Elsdon swallowed. He shook his head.

"Then I advise you to listen carefully to what I have to say next," continued Mr. Smith. "You will be given few rules that you need to follow during your time here, but we treat violations of those rules seriously. The first rule is that you must show proper respect toward me, your Seeker. You must rise to your feet whenever I am present, and where necessary you should address me as 'Mr. Smith' or 'sir.' If you fail to show the same sort of respect toward me that you would toward a schoolmaster or a workmaster, then I fear that your visit here will shortly become quite unpleasant. Is that clear, Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes," he said faintly. Then, as his heart thudded within him: "I mean, Yes, sir."

The Seeker did not respond for a moment. His posture was stiff, as though he were a guard on ceremonial duty, and his eyes in the dancing light looked alternately dark and glittering cold. He continued, "The second rule – and this is by far the most important rule for prisoners – is that you must at all times answer my questions truthfully. If, for some reason, you do not feel ready to discuss a particular subject, you may say so, or you may remain silent. But under no circumstances may you lie to me. The consequences for such lying would be severe. And I should warn you ahead of time, Mr. Taylor: I have been working in this profession for twenty years. It is not easy for a prisoner to pass off to me a lie as the truth."

He waited. Elsdon said, even more faintly than before, "I understand, sir."

The eyes remained cold. Elsdon wondered whether the Seeker had noticed that Elsdon had made no promises. After a while, Mr. Smith said, "Those are the bindings placed upon you as a prisoner. I should add that the same bindings are placed upon me as your Seeker. I must treat you with respect in the manner indicated before, and I must speak truth to you. If at any time you believe that I have violated my duties toward you or that you have been ill-used by one of your guards, you have the right to ask to speak to the Eternal Dungeon's Codifier, who oversees the inhabitants of the dungeon. In the extremely unlikely event that your request should be ignored, you may bring the matter to the attention of whichever magistrate judges your case, so that he may investigate this violation of your rights. Is that clear?"

Elsdon's heart was beating faster than before. It took him some time before he was able to repeat, "I understand, sir."

"Do you have any questions?" the Seeker asked. "About the routine of the dungeon? The times you will be fed? The questions you will be asked? The instruments of torture I use?"

The faintness went beyond Elsdon's voice this time and entered his body. He could feel the sweat upon his skin; he wondered whether he had turned white. He blurted out, "What if I'm innocent?"

The Seeker's green gaze did not waver. "If you are innocent, then I trust that our time together will be short. I would far rather find a prisoner innocent than guilty; too many prisoners are sent to us, and the quicker that we can release them from here, the better. If your release is to the lighted world rather than to the executioner, it is likely to come more quickly. But we are commissioned by the Queen to ascertain the truth of accusations of death-sentence crimes, and we are committed to fulfill that commission. Please don't waste my time with false pleas of innocence, Mr. Taylor. It will only make our time together more difficult."

Elsdon did not reply. He was still standing where he had been since the younger guard's whip touched him, squeezed into the corner near the door. Mr. Smith had chosen to stand in the opposite corner, out of arm's reach. Half-turned as the Seeker was from the light flickering through the far wall, Elsdon could see Mr. Smith's eyes only because he had a habit of letting his head turn away briefly whenever Elsdon finished speaking, as though entering into contemplation of the information provided. Now, as Elsdon's silence continued, Mr. Smith's gaze remained unwavering upon him.

"Are you ready, Mr. Taylor?" the Seeker asked softly.

Elsdon found that he was hugging himself, gripping his arms so tightly that his lashed arm burned. He could not breathe, much less speak. He gave his head a single jerk of acknowledgment, then looked, involuntarily, toward the ring on the wall.

Mr. Smith made no move toward the ring, however. He said, "Tell me about your mother."

Elsdon stared at him, convinced that he had misheard. "Sir?"

"Your mother. She is no longer living, I understand."

"No, sir," replied Elsdon. Then, realizing the possible reason for the enquiry, he added hastily, "She died of an accident. When I was quite young. I was only four when she fell down the stairs in our house."

The Seeker nodded. "And did you love her?"

"I suppose I must have. I don't really remember her well."

"Your sister was how old when this happened?"

He felt his throat tighten. "Less than a year old."

"Then she did not take charge of the household after your mother's death."

"No, I did. That is, when I grew a few years older, I became the one who cared for Sara and gave orders to the servants who ran the household. My father was too busy with his business for that."

"And did your sister resent that? It must have been hard for her, being forced to take orders from an older brother rather than a parent."

The Seeker's voice was bleached clean of all emotion, but Elsdon felt his muscles tighten. "I don't think so. She said I was better qualified to run the household than she was – she was nice that way, forever giving people praise they didn't deserve. Actually, I always muddle the household accounts and make all the wrong decisions about what food to buy and give the servants the wrong orders."

"Your sister told you this?"

"No, my father explains afterwards, when he's clearing up my messes. He's very patient with me."

The Seeker's gaze wandered away momentarily. The hood hid his face so effectively that Elsdon could not begin to guess what his expression might be; thus his body started as the Seeker asked suddenly, "And did you love your sister?"

"Yes," he said swiftly. Then, when the Seeker did not respond, "I did! Truly. We had the usual quarrels that brothers and sisters have, but nothing more than that. . . ." His words trailed off.

The Seeker said, in the same cool voice he had used from the beginning, "I believe you."

Elsdon stared at him. "You do?"

His face half-hidden by the hood, the Seeker raised his eyebrows. "I told you I had experience at this work, Mr. Taylor. What of your father?"

"My father?"

"Do you love him?"

"Yes, of course."

This time the Seeker's gaze did not move from Elsdon's face. After a long moment he said, with the quietness of a hunting cat, "Mr. Taylor, in light of what I told you earlier, would you like to withdraw that reply?"

"Sir?"

"You may remain silent, Mr. Taylor. You do not need to respond to the question I asked you if you would not feel comfortable doing so at this time. That is preferable to speaking falsely."

"I don't understand." Elsdon's brow puckered with puzzlement. "Of course I love my father. Why shouldn't I?"

Another patch of stillness occurred, broken only by the continuing faint sound of the man elsewhere in the dungeon; his sobs had turned to screams. The Seeker's expression remained hidden. Then Mr. Smith said, very softly, "Mr. Taylor, please go to the other end of the cell and remove your shirt."

Even as he spoke, the Seeker was turning away, knocking lightly upon the door. The door opened immediately, and the guards, apparently needing no instruction, walked into the cell. The younger guard was already lifting the whip from his belt.

Mr. Sobel closed the door behind them, turning the key in the lock and dropping the key into a pocket within his jacket. His gaze was upon the Seeker rather than Elsdon. Mr. Smith looked back at Elsdon, still standing in the corner. He waited.

Elsdon's limbs felt like rocks, too heavy to move. He managed somehow to reach the other end of the cell, though his hands were shaking by the time he untied the fastenings of his shirt. The Seeker said nothing. He had not moved to take the whip from the hand of Mr. Urman. He simply watched Elsdon, as a cat might watch a cornered mouse: unblinking, body poised in readiness. The stiffness that had been in his posture before had melted away, as though he had reached his natural element.

When the shirt was in Elsdon's hand, he stood uncertainly, clutching at the cloth like a child clutching at its doll. Without a word, Mr. Sobel took the shirt from him, carefully laying it upon the hard bed-shelf, then turned back and looked at Mr. Smith. The Seeker nodded slightly, without removing his gaze from Elsdon, and Mr. Sobel pulled from his side-pocket a leather strap.

A sound escaped Elsdon then. He found that he was pressing back against the flame-warmed wall, directly below the iron ring. His throat made sound after sound as the older guard stepped forward. The whip was forgotten; the Seeker was forgotten. Elsdon's vision had narrowed to a rough strip of cowhide, no longer than a forearm's length.

Mr. Sobel stopped suddenly in his tracks, and Elsdon, turning his head to follow the older guard's gaze, saw that Mr. Smith was scrutinizing him with narrowed gaze. "Mr. Taylor," the Seeker said quietly, "do you prefer not to be bound?"

It was the trap Elsdon had been expecting since his arrival. Nothing in his life had trained him for the experiences of this week; he was like an untutored babe thrown into the water to drown. The only conclusion he had been able to reach on his own, as he struggled to stay on the surface, was that he must not let his Seeker guess about this. It would be like placing the perfect instrument of torture in the man's hands, and inviting him to make use of it.

What he had not taken into account was the Seeker's ability to find the answers to questions without need for his prisoner's words. After a moment more of scrutiny, Mr. Smith nodded, and he gestured to Mr. Sobel. The leather strap disappeared into the guard's pocket.

Mr. Smith turned his gaze back to his disconcerted prisoner. "The binding is not a necessary part of the procedure," he told Elsdon in as matter-of-fact a manner as if he had been discussing which spices should be used in a dish. "Its primary purpose is to assist the prisoner in remaining still during the beating; if you move at the wrong moment, the possibility exists of severe injury. If you believe that you can stay still on your own, then you may remain unbound."

"Yes," said Elsdon before he could think better of it. "Please don't bind me."

He caught his breath then, sensing the trap close upon him like a vise. Bindings for his hands would come now, and bindings for his feet, and for his legs and his arms and his eyes . . .

The Seeker, though, seemed in no hurry to follow up on his advantage. He made a circling gesture with his hand. Elsdon, after a moment of incomprehension, turned to face the wall, placing his forearms upon the wall and burying his face within their refuge. His body was beginning to sweat from the heat pressing through the wall, but the translucent blocks were not so fiery as to burn him. He kept his eyes closed, tense in anticipation.

The sound of a step next to him caused him to jerk his head up and open his eyes. The Seeker was only an arm's span from him now, and his hand was still empty of any whip or binding or other instrument. His body looked as relaxed as that of a man in bed with his beloved.

"Your records show that you were not beaten by your schoolmasters," he said in the same matter-of-fact tone as before, "and your back tells the same tale. This being the case, I will give you the minimum punishment: five light lashes. You may find them difficult to bear, since you have not experienced a beating before. Please hold in mind that any further lies you tell me will be treated more severely."

Elsdon bit his lip and began to bury his face again, only to be frozen into inaction as Mr. Smith said, "Please keep your face turned toward me, Mr. Taylor. Even at a low level such as this, torture has its dangers. One of the ways in which I judge whether the punishment is proceeding properly is by watching your face."

The Seeker turned his head to look behind Elsdon. Apparently matters were in readiness there, for Mr. Smith turned back and said, "Please count the lashes for Mr. Urman."

"Count them?" Elsdon's voice emerged faint, as though from a far distance.

"You will find this easier if you space the lashes in accordance with your readiness to receive them. Begin now."

Elsdon stared at the Seeker for a moment more, but no further instruction was forthcoming. So, with breath squeezed tight, Elsdon spoke the word.

He was barely aware of what followed, as far as the beating was concerned. His thoughts were focussed upon the Seeker's green eyes, which were flecked with bits of gold, and upon the eyelids that did not blink. By the third lash, Elsdon had almost forgotten that he was staring at something human, so still was the Seeker. Thus he was startled when Mr. Smith said, "Wait."

His gaze remained unwavering upon Elsdon, but the fourth lash, for which Elsdon had just spoken the number, did not fall. Elsdon, suddenly uneasy, turned his head to see that Mr. Sobel was standing at his right side, his gaze fixed upon the Seeker. The guard looked puzzled.

Elsdon slowly turned his head back toward Mr. Smith. His heart was throbbing in his throat. The Seeker could not know; he could not possibly know . . .

"Mr. Taylor," the Seeker said in his quiet voice, "when were you last beaten, and what were the circumstances of that beating?"

"I've never been—"

Elsdon's rapid response was instinctive; he shut his mouth only because the Seeker's gaze had narrowed. The cell was utterly silent. The tortured man elsewhere in the dungeon had fallen silent. Perhaps the man had received mercy. Perhaps he had entered into death.

"Do you wish to retract that answer?" the Seeker asked softly.

Elsdon's throat hurt more than his back; he could not swallow, much less speak. He nodded slightly.

The Seeker looked at him a while longer, then stepped away. He picked up Elsdon's shirt, and handed it, not to Elsdon, but to Mr. Sobel, who had come over to stand near him.

"We will speak again later," Mr. Smith said, his eyes inscrutable in the flickering light. "Mr. Sobel, Mr. Urman . . . I wish a word with you."

CHAPTER TWO

"Seekers!" grumbled Mr. Bergsen. "They should all be hamstrung and thrown to the Vovimians."

Elsdon, startled, craned his head to look back at the healer, who was rubbing ointment onto his back. "Excuse me?" he said tentatively.

"Cruelty is bad enough. Cruelty that covers itself as kindness is beyond bearing. Look at that!" He pointed at Elsdon's back.

Elsdon tried to look and failed. He said, yet more hesitantly, "It doesn't hurt very much, actually."

"Ah, they have you mind-twisted already. 'Just a light whipping, Mr. Taylor. It won't hurt you in the least.' That's what you were told, wasn't it?"

"No," Elsdon replied truthfully. "Mr. Smith told me it would hurt."

"In the very moment that he told you he was showing you mercy, no doubt. Humph." The healer reached over and scooped up a gob of ointment. "Bad enough that they should tear apart the bodies of prisoners, but they insist on finding justifications for what they do. 'The Code allows us to punish prisoners if they break the rules placed upon them.' I wish I could find every copy of their *Code of Seeking* and burn them all to cinders. Turn a bit, please; the lash marks carry round to your side."

Turning and raising his arms out of the way, Elsdon said, "If you hate the Seekers so much, why do you work for them?"

"You don't think I work for *those* bloodletters, do you? I work for the Codifier – not that that's much of an improvement, I'll admit. But at least I can prevent the Seekers from torturing prisoners whose health won't stand for that sort of treatment. When those deaf-and-dumb Seekers listen to me, that is." He swept the ointment on with broad strokes of the hand as Elsdon bit his lip against the sting.

"Take your case," said Mr. Bergsen, his eyes attentive on his work. "I received your medical records late last night, with a polite note from Mr. Smith requesting immediate approval of you for possible torture. Note how he phrased that: 'approval,' as though the idea of my disapproving of

torture wouldn't cross his mind. So I sent him back a message saying that, as far as your body's health was concerned, you weren't likely to die of heart failure if you were tortured, but that if he had any concern for your mind's health, he should take a more careful look at your records." The healer snorted. "I should have spelled matters out at a level a two-year-old could understand. —Right, strip off the remainder of your clothes, please."

Elsdon stared at the healer, his heart suddenly painful in its throbbing.

"Don't look at me like that," the healer said with irritability. "You don't have anything underneath that I haven't seen before. Do you think I've practiced the healing arts for forty years without encountering the wicked ways of the world?"

Elsdon whispered, "Mr. Smith . . ."

"You insult me. You insult the entire Guild of Healers. Do you really think I would pass on to a third person what I learn from a medical inspection? Come, I don't have much time. I have to check on the progress of a prisoner who was racked yesterday."

Elsdon glanced at the door. The first thing the healer had done upon his entrance was cover the door's watch-hole with a bit of chewing-gum, apparently undisturbed by the prospect that the guards would object. Slowly Elsdon stripped himself; then, at the healer's gesture, he lay stomach-down upon the cool mattress of the bed-shelf. His face was blazing hot as he buried it in his arms.

"Hmm." The healer touched him lightly, causing Elsdon to flinch. Then Mr. Bergsen said, "Nasty, nasty. As bad as I've ever seen. No marks across the kidney, though. Someone's been careful of your life, if not your health. . . . Very well, you may clothe yourself again."

Elsdon did so; he was shaking by the time he finished fumbling his fingers around the knots in his shirt. The healer was busy packing up his bag. He left the ointment on the bed-shelf, saying, "Spread that on when it hurts again. Your upper back will be healed within a day or two; Mr. Smith does at least know how to order his guards to keep a beating light."

"If I'm beaten harder . . ." Elsdon ventured to say.

"Won't happen. When I heard what a fool the High Seeker had made of himself, I went into his office and tore up every torture request the Record-keeper had sent me. Then I flung the scraps of paper into Mr. Smith's face."

Elsdon found that, unexpectedly, he was having to bite his lip to keep from laughing. There was a suggestion of a twitch at the healer's lips as he added, "After he'd apologized to me, I grudgingly agreed to approve the torture of the other prisoners. But not in your case. Let the High Seeker go practice his sadistic pleasures on other young men." He stood up, strode over to the door, and rapped on it, waiting for it to open.

Elsdon, standing next to the bed-shelf, looked down at the ointment. He picked it up and was contemplating it when he heard Mr. Bergsen cough from the open doorway.

"It's not poisonous," the healer said as he peeled the gum off the watch-hole, "so it won't do you any good to eat it. I'm sorry; there are limits to what I can do for prisoners." And then he swept away, his voice high in indignation at the guards who helped the Seekers in their bloody work.

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"Hoi!"

Elsdon had been screwing and unscrewing the ointment jar as though he were a schoolmaster demonstrating the principle of eternal rebirth. Startled out of his thoughts, he looked up from where he sat, at the far end of the cell, with his back warmed by the fiery wall. Mr. Sobel was standing in the cell, with the door closed behind him. He held up a yellow ball for Elsdon's view.

"Would you like this?" he asked.

Elsdon stared at the apple before saying hesitantly, "I've already been fed."

"Yes, I know, but I was given two in my dinner by mistake, and I thought you'd like the other one." He pulled a second apple from his pocket, tossing the first to Elsdon.

Elsdon caught it in an automatic manner, staring past the fruit to the guard. Mr. Sobel was as old as Elsdon's father, in his forties, but in manner of speech and gesture he seemed much the same as Elsdon's age-mates. He was tossing the other apple up and down in his hand now, saying, "May I sit?"

Too late, Elsdon wondered whether the rules he had been given earlier applied to guards as well. He nodded mutely, and Mr. Sobel came forward and sat down in front of him, within arm's reach. In an easy manner, he slid his dagger from its sheath and began using it to cut his apple.

After a moment, Elsdon said, "Are you allowed to be in here like this?"

"Not when I'm on duty," the guard replied, stretching his legs out to the side. "Bloody blades, it's good to be sitting again. I don't know what kind of madness muddled me into taking up work that requires me to stand for half the clock-hours of the day."

"Mr. Bergsen doesn't seem to like his work here either," Elsdon commented. "I always thought of the Eternal Dungeon as being a place whose gates were clogged with thousands of prison workers, demanding to be let in."

Mr. Sobel snorted as the juice from the cut apple trickled over his fingers. "That's an apt image. We get scores of requests for employment here every year. Every guard and torturer in the world seems to have made it his aim to work here, for at least a short while."

"So it's hard to choose among them?"

"Oh, it's easy to choose among them. Almost none of them would be able to withstand the weight placed upon them here. —Look, do you need this to cut that?" He held out his dagger, hilt-first, to Elsdon.

Elsdon felt his breath freeze in his chest as he stared down at the blade. After a moment he shook his head quickly and took a bite of his apple. He nearly choked on the bile that was rising to fill his throat.

The guard appeared uninterested in the aftermath of whatever test he had set. He was concentrating on wiping his dagger clean of juice with a handkerchief he had pulled from his pocket. "We had a foreign torturer

come to demonstrate his skills here last year," he said. "A man who was the most famed torturer in his land; it was said that no prisoner could hold out against him. After seeing his technique, everyone here agreed that he was virtually matchless in his skills. He was nearly as skilled as the High Seeker."

Elsdon managed to swallow the apple and the bile. "So you hired him?"

"No, we sent him on his way. He could break a prisoner, but he was willing to do so for any reason. The goal of the breaking was of no interest to him. He wasn't the sort of man who would ever be able to understand the reasons why we do the work here that we do."

Elsdon slowly stroked the smooth skin of the apple, barely aware that the fruit was in his lap. "So why *do* you do this work?"

For a moment it seemed that Mr. Sobel would not reply. His gaze had drifted away, as though he were seeing something beyond the cell. Then he said, "Do you believe in eternal rebirth?"

"Of course," responded Elsdon with surprise. "Who doesn't?"

Mr. Sobel shrugged. "The Vovimians don't."

"They're barbarians."

"Well, then. If a person commits a terrible crime, and no one ever requires him to confess his crime and pay his debt in whatever manner he can . . . When he finally dies, do you believe that he'll be reborn?"

The silence extended for a long time. From where he sat, Elsdon could hear the faint rumble of flames behind him. He pulled away from the wall, feeling the bond of sweat joining back and shirt. "That's why this is called the Eternal Dungeon? Because you help prisoners to continue in eternal rebirth?"

The guard nodded without speaking.

Elsdon said, "I thought— I'd thought it was named that because no one who is imprisoned here ever leaves here."

Without warning, the guard gave a short laugh. "Well, there's a dust-speck of truth to that, I suppose. But for the most part, this isn't a dungeon for long-term imprisonment. It's a dungeon for searching men and women who have been accused of death-sentence crimes."

"No, I meant . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Oh." The guard's expression turned grave. "You tell that rumor to any Seeker, and he'll be hard pressed to hide his fury. Seekers consider it a terrible failure if a prisoner dies while being searched. Our job is to ascertain whether the prisoner has committed a crime, and then to hand him over to the magistrates afterwards."

"So most of the dungeon's prisoners go free?"

He tried to hide the eagerness in his voice, but must not have succeeded, for the look of pity on Mr. Sobel's face was plain. "No," the guard said quietly. "Most prisoners are executed on the magistrates' orders for their crimes."

Metal squeaked at the other end of the cell. The door opened a short space, and the day guard who had brought Elsdon his dinner poked his head inside. "Mr. Aaron wants to see you," he told Mr. Sobel. "He sent a message about a report you haven't submitted yet."

Mr. Sobel groaned as he rose to his feet. "Sometimes," he said, "I think we would break more prisoners by handing them over to the Record-keeper and having him badger them to submit their confessions." He tossed his half-finished apple into Elsdon's lap, saying, "I'll see you this evening. Don't worry; you'll find that matters have changed with the High Seeker." Then he was gone, before Elsdon could ask him what he meant.

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But he was right. Late that evening, as Elsdon stood in front of his black-hooded Seeker, unable to hide the wave of trembling that racked his body, he heard Mr. Smith say, "I wish to apologize, Mr. Taylor."

"Sir?" His voice came out no louder than a mouse's.

"I made a grave error yesterday – two errors, in fact, but the first was the gravest. When you told me that you loved your father, I believed that you were deliberately lying to me."

Elsdon waited, but the High Seeker said no more, so finally Elsdon replied in a low voice, "I do love him. I don't know why you think I don't."

"You did not deliberately lie to me, Mr. Taylor; I can see that now. I am sorry for my misjudgment of you. I assure you I will take care that I do not misjudge you again."

Elsdon found that he was having a hard time keeping his gaze focussed upon the High Seeker's intense eyes. He waited with taut muscles for the searching to begin again.

"Tell me about your school, Mr. Taylor."

"Sir?" He supposed that, by this time, he should stop sounding startled at every remark the hooded man made.

"I would like to know about your school. Tell me what it looks like." And though his posture did not relax, Mr. Smith steadied himself with his hand against the wall, as though he had come to the cell for no purpose other than to hear how architects designed school-halls these days.

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"He doesn't ask me anything that might have to do with me committing a crime," Elsdon said. "All he talks about is my schooldays: what my schoolwork was like, whether I had good times with my age-mates, and so on."

"He hasn't asked you about your family at all?" said Mr. Sobel, leaning over to scoop up the gravy from his dinner plate.

"Only indirectly. He asked me why, when I left school, I didn't go looking for work."

Carefully licking gravy from his spoon, Mr. Sobel said, "I'd wondered that too. When I came of age, I couldn't have been more eager to leave home. I wanted to prove my worth among other men."

"Oh." Elsdon's face grew warm. He leaned forward and stared at the remains of his own dinner. "Well, you've seen what I'm like."

"Yes?" The guard's voice held nothing more than mild curiosity.

"I'm not— That is, I couldn't hope to compete among other men. Not the way I am. I was grateful that my father was willing to pay me for taking care of his household. He was more generous than I deserved."

Ironware scraped against pottery as Mr. Sobel made another searching for any remaining gravy. "I don't understand," the guard said. "I saw your school records; you had high marks. Why do you think you wouldn't do well in a job?"

Elsdon swallowed around the painful hardness growing in his throat. "My school-marks were deceptive. The essence of what I am— My family always knew the truth."

"I thought you told Mr. Smith that your sister had a high opinion of you."

Elsdon's gaze flew up toward the guard, who was lapping away at his iron spoon. For a moment, Elsdon almost spoke; then he closed his mouth quickly.

The guard gave a soft chuckle. "He doesn't talk to me about your sessions. It was in the first-day searching report he filed with the Record-keeper. The High Seeker is as much a prisoner of documentwork as the rest of us."

Elsdon nodded. His face had grown warm again. Reaching down to toy with his spoon – the only ironware permitted to prisoners – he said, "Sara was always generous too. But my father – he knows the truth about me."

Even as he spoke, he knew he had gone too far, and he tensed. But when he looked up again, he was surprised to see a faint expression of distress upon the guard's face, as though he had committed a social breach.

"I shouldn't be asking you questions about your family," Mr. Sobel said. "It comes too close to searching, and the Code won't allow guards to search prisoners. It just seems odd to me, that you'd feel you were unqualified for work other than supervising your father's household. Did you tell Mr. Smith all this?"

"Yes, of course. And then he asked me what types of work the other boys at my school chose. His questions don't make any sense."

The guard shrugged, scraping at his dish. "He often doesn't make sense to me either. If you were to ask any prison worker in the world which man was most skilled at the art of searching prisoners, they wouldn't hesitate to say, 'Layle Smith.' But if you were to ask anyone how the High Seeker does his work . . . After seventeen years, I've given up trying to understand the questions he asks prisoners."

"That's how long you've been with Mr. Smith?" As he spoke, Elsdon leaned back against the fiery wall. They were on the floor again, as they had been for the past three mornings, this being the period when they shared dinnertime. Sitting on the floor allowed Mr. Sobel to stretch out his tired legs.

The guard nodded. "I've been with him since his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon. He was transferred here from another prison, but of course he had to be retrained, as all of us do. He was taught by the old High Seeker – the High Torturer, he was called back in those days. I was guard for the High Torturer; after the training period I asked permission to serve as guard to Mr. Smith."

"That didn't anger the High Torturer? —You can have my gravy, by the way."

"Are you sure?" Mr. Sobel waited for Elsdon's nod before reaching over to take the plate. He sighed, saying, "Stealing food from a prisoner. I hope the Codifier never finds out about this. . . . No, the High Torturer was pleased when I asked for the transfer. He knew – we all knew – that Mr. Smith would be the one to succeed him, and the High Torturer wanted an experienced guard to help Mr. Smith learn the ways of the Eternal Dungeon." Mr. Sobel leaned forward and scraped the gravy from Elsdon's plate. "Not that I've ever done much besides stand around, dropping my jaw in awe. —Bloody blades, no, don't give me your apple too. I don't mind falling into the hands of the Codifier, but if Mr. Smith should learn I'm taking food from you . . ."

"Oh, but maybe it would help you to be Mr. Smith's prisoner." Elsdon gave a small smile. "Good experience for a guard, don't you think?"

Mr. Sobel shuddered visibly. "No, thank you. I'd prefer to be put on the rack by any of the other Seekers rather than endure five minutes being searched by the High Seeker."

"But you must know him well if you've been his guard for seventeen years. Are you friends with him?"

Mr. Sobel suddenly seemed to lose interest in his food. Abandoning the last of the gravy, he pushed the plate back and shook his head silently.

Elsdon contemplated his bowed head for a moment before saying, "I suppose it wouldn't be professional for the two of you to form a friendship."

The guard shook his head slowly. "No, it's not that. I . . ." He looked up. There was a tension to his expression that Elsdon had never seen before, even in the moments after Elsdon had attacked the guard.

"If you had a very great darkness in you," Mr. Sobel said carefully, "a darkness so deep that it would frighten even those who worked in the bloodiest professions . . . Would you be able to share yourself with someone who had never experienced such darkness?"

Elsdon wanted to sever his gaze then, but the strain in Mr. Sobel's face would not permit him to do so. He said softly, "I've seen that in Mr. Smith."

The guard shook his head. "You haven't," he said firmly. "Truly, you've seen only the surface of the High Seeker so far. This other part of him . . . I don't know how deep it goes, but it only begins to show itself when he's with the worst prisoners, the ones he must rack. He uses it as a way to frighten them into confessing."

"And you've seen this." Elsdon's voice remained soft.

Mr. Sobel let out his breath slowly. "Yes. I attend him in the rack room. Afterwards— It affects me almost as much as it does the prisoners, and I know Mr. Smith senses that. It's little wonder he doesn't want to share more of himself with me when we're in our leisure hours."

"Perhaps he's afraid to." Even as he spoke, Elsdon realized how absurd his words were. He was not surprised when a faint smile drifted onto the lips of the guard.

But all that Mr. Sobel said was, "You're odd."

Elsdon bit his lip, making no response.

"Not odd in a bad way," the guard added hastily. "It's just that here you are, a prisoner in the Eternal Dungeon . . . and yet, every time we meet, somehow we always end up talking about my troubles."

"Perhaps I'm just trying to deflect the conversation from me."

"Maybe. I suppose the High Seeker would be able to know that."

Elsdon shifted uneasily, playing with the ironware once more. "What I said before about Mr. Smith . . . Don't pay any care to me; I always get things in a muddle. I'm sure that when Mr. Smith is with his friends— What is it?"

He could not have said what made him sure that some great discovery had been made, for Mr. Sobel had neither spoken nor moved. Only his expression changed slightly, and this was quickly hidden as the guard got onto his knees and began to collect the plates.

Watching him, Elsdon said slowly, "Mr. Smith doesn't have any friends."

The guard looked up finally. Distress lay upon his face. "Look," he said, "we shouldn't be talking about the High Seeker like this. It isn't right."

"I'm sorry," said Elsdon quickly. "I'm invading his privacy, and yours."

"I don't mind talking to you about my life, but . . ." Mr. Sobel uttered a soft curse and rose, abandoning the plates. He thumped his fist against the fiery wall, then stared at the flames for a moment before giving Elsdon a rueful smile. "Now you see why I'm not qualified to be a Seeker. Mr. Smith would never have let you trail-blaze the conversation like that."

"I'm sorry," repeated Elsdon, his voice falling back into hesitancy.

"Oh, I don't mind, usually. It's a weight off me from other times, when I must be the one giving prisoners orders."

Elsdon watched the guard as he strode back and forth across the tiny confines of the cell, stopping occasionally to stand like a stork and shake the cramps from his loose leg. Through the door came the muted sounds of morning-time. It still disconcerted Elsdon to have his evening meal at dawn, though only the changing of guard shifts could have told him how much time had passed in this sunless place.

"You spoke earlier of a weight placed on guards and Seekers," Elsdon said. "What did you mean by that?"

"I meant the Code." Then, seeing Elsdon's blank look, Mr. Sobel added, "The *Code of Seeking* – it's our rule book. Our code of ethics. Our philosophy. . . . I'm not sure how to describe it. It tells why we are different from the other dungeons and prisons of the world, and what rules we must follow to assist the prisoners."

"To assist them in confessing, you mean?" Elsdon said slowly.

"Oh, more than that." Mr. Sobel stopped a moment and chewed on his thumb, his brows drawn low in concentration, then nodded at a thought. "Here's what I mean. The Code says that if a guard observes any unusual behavior in a prisoner, he must report it to a Seeker."

"What sort of unusual behavior?"

"Anything at all. For example, when Mr. Urman sliced you with his whip, you barely reacted. I didn't notice this, because my eyes were closed from the knock on the head you'd given me. But that lack of reaction was unusual. Mr. Urman should have reported that to Mr. Smith when the High Seeker arrived at your cell. If he had, Mr. Smith would have known that you had experienced severe pain in the past and would have taken that into account when deciding whether to have you beaten."

Elsdon pulled his legs up against his chest and said nothing.

"Some guards think the rule about reporting unusual behavior is foolish, but you've seen for yourself what can happen if it's not followed,"

continued Mr. Sobel. "The Code chains guards and Seekers with all sorts of rules like that, for the sake of the prisoners."

"So that's the only weight upon you? The Code?"

Mr. Sobel stopped in mid-stride and looked over at Elsdon, huddled against the wall. The guard cocked his head as he said, "What other weight do you have in mind?"

"I don't know." Elsdon stared down at the tips of his calf shoes. "Any sort of weight. I should think it would be hard being a guard – having to hurt prisoners, to frighten them . . ."

Mr. Sobel gave a sharp laugh. "Bloody blades, I can't believe we're having this conversation. Yes, you're right about that – at least, it's hard for me. But if you want to know the worst weight . . . It's not being sure."

"Not being sure?" Elsdon lifted his head.

"About the prisoners who are executed. Sometimes I'm not sure whether they really were guilty, or whether they just told us what they thought we wanted to hear. I wake up sweat-soaked in bed sometimes, thinking about that."

The guard's eyes were lowered now, his body still. He was silent for a long moment as Elsdon watched him, his own tension forgotten. Finally Elsdon said, "Is that the greatest weight upon the High Seeker too?"

The guard looked up. "I don't know," he said quietly. "Why don't you ask him?"

CHAPTER THREE

The High Seeker remained motionless, like a hidden viper. After a long while he said, "If you were to ask the other Seekers in this place, I imagine that most of them would answer as Mr. Sobel did, that the greatest weight upon them is the fear that they have caused the death of innocent men and women."

Elsdon, who always seemed to end up crammed as far as he could into the near corner of the cell, said, "That isn't your greatest weight?"

"No. Mine is that I may have caused the release of guilty men and women."

Elsdon gripped his hands together so tightly they hurt. After a time he said, "I suppose that could cause the death of innocents also. I mean, if the criminals are murderers, and they repeat their crimes."

"That also, of course. But my immediate charge as a Seeker is to assist prisoners, and if I allow them to leave here trapped within the same darkness that brought them here, there is a chance they will never free themselves from that darkness. There are few places in the world that make as much effort to free prisoners from their dark chains as the Eternal Dungeon does."

"I suppose," Elsdon said in a soft voice, "that is true for the Seekers as well. So it must be especially hard for a Seeker to fail in breaking the chains of a prisoner, if his own chains were broken here."

Mr. Smith seemed disinclined to speak for a while. His cool green gaze kept Elsdon pinned to the wall. Finally he said, "Mr. Taylor, it has been many years since I have searched a prisoner who is as difficult as you are."

Elsdon felt confusion take hold of him. "Sir?"

"I ask you why you failed to leave your father's household upon your coming of age, and you treat me to a discourse on your father's dilemmas in finding someone to run his household. I ask you what work you were most skilled at in school, and you tell me about the problems your age-mates had in deciding where to take their skills after school-leaving. I ask you whether you got along well with your schoolmasters, and you outline

– at great length – the health troubles each schoolmaster endures. And now, if I understand you correctly, you are seeking to comfort your torturer. Why?"

The final word came as a whiplash. Elsdon jerked back instinctively; his backbone ground into the corner. He said breathlessly, "I was just wondering if you knew . . . That is, if someone is chained in darkness as you say, how does he free himself from that?"

A long silence followed. The High Seeker's gaze had turned away from Elsdon, as was his custom, and Elsdon was left alone with the small sounds of the prison: angry shouts coming faintly from another cell, and fainter still, the sound of fire behind the translucent wall. He could not hear the guards; he wondered whether Mr. Sobel was watching this conversation, and listening.

Finally Mr. Smith said, in as even a voice as he used at all other times, "When I was quite young, my mother taught me that, if you do mischief, the best way to keep yourself from doing mischief again in the future is to tell someone that you've done wrong – a parent, or some other figure of authority – and to ask their help in making whatever reparation you can for your misdeed."

"And the reparation—" Elsdon was forced to swallow in an attempt to open his tight throat. "What sort of reparation—? That is, if I knew someone who had committed a crime, and he was sorry for it, would the fact that he was sorry count in his favor? Could his reparation be less?"

His green gaze now locked upon Elsdon, the High Seeker said, "It is difficult to discuss this matter in the abstract. But if, for example, someone had murdered a member of his own family, and had done so without provocation from the family member, then I must tell you that I think it's likely any magistrate would place the death sentence upon him."

Another silence followed. Elsdon, who had pushed himself as far into the corner as any human being could possibly go, felt sweat cover his skin as though Mr. Smith had been torturing him with a brand. After a long moment, the High Seeker said, "Shall we continue this discussion tomorrow, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon shook his head. "No," he said in a low voice. "Now. I'm ready now to tell you what happened."

He spoke the final words in a whisper. The High Seeker nodded and glanced toward the door. As though a signal knock had been given, the door opened, and Mr. Sobel walked in. He was carrying a memorandum book and a pencil.

When the door had closed again, and Mr. Sobel was poised with pencil to paper, the High Seeker turned his attention back to his prisoner. Elsdon swallowed, trying to wet his dry mouth, and said, "I don't know where to begin."

"I would suggest," said the High Seeker, "that you begin with your father."

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He was four when his mother died. The death came with no warning other than raised voices, and those were hardly unusual in his family: his mother had a fiery temper and often quarrelled with his father, always racing from the house afterwards in a fury. So Elsdon was not startled out of his play with his baby sister until he heard a scream, followed by a series of loud thumps upon the stairs. When he ran to the foot of the stairway to look, he found his mother lying crumpled there, as his father stared down the stairs with disbelief.

After that, matters changed between himself and his father. He could not remember the first time it happened, but the pattern remained the same forever after: his father would come into his bedroom, speak in a friendly manner to him about his play or other activities of the day, and then, with no change of expression, his father would bind him and beat him.

At first Elsdon assumed that all boys were treated thus by their fathers. Not until he reached school age did he learn that, in the queendom of Yclau, boys were normally beaten only by their schoolmasters, and then only for dreadful offenses.

Since his father was in all other respects a man who adhered strictly to custom, Elsdon could only conclude that there was something particularly awful about himself that caused his father to punish him. Gradually he

came to connect the beatings with the raised voices he had heard on the day of his mother's death, and with his father's occasional gentle hints that he possessed too much of his mother in him.

He had been too ashamed of the beatings to speak of them to his age-mates; now his shame deepened. He was grateful that his father always beat him on the bottom, where he could hide the scars from others, and he acquired a body shyness so intense that even the neighborhood healer ceased urging him to disrobe himself of his drawers.

His father was usually careful not to beat him elsewhere on the body. On the few occasions that the belt slipped, his father promptly took Elsdon to the healer. Elsdon always found ways to explain how his injuries had arisen, and he was grateful that his father backed his falsehoods. It was one of many kindnesses his father showed him, for he was a man who demonstrated great patience toward the ill-made son he had begotten.

At first Elsdon hoped that the beatings would drive from him whatever his father feared, but matters only worsened as Elsdon grew older. At times, Elsdon was seized with a fury he could not contain, and once, for no reason that he could understand, he threw a vase at his father. The vase missed, but Elsdon was terrified at what he had done. He was not surprised that his father's beatings became more frequent after that.

In the final year of his childhood, there was a change. Increasingly, Elsdon was finding that the hardest part of his punishments was not the beating but the binding. His father must have guessed that, for one day the punishment abruptly switched: instead of beating him, his father simply bound and blindfolded him, then left him tied to his bed overnight.

Now he not only had to endure the shame of knowing what he was, but also the shame of soiled bed-linens. He washed them himself, determined that the servants should not know the truth about him. When he began to find it harder and harder to keep from screaming during the bindings, he begged his father to gag him. His father complied.

Elsdon had tried to hide the truth from his sister as well, but she knew. She was utterly unlike her mother, with no fire in her; instead, she had an innocent sweetness about her. She would come to his bedroom after the punishments and hold him while he cried. Once she even came into his

room while he was tied and tried to free him. He begged her to leave him be, and she, uncertain as to the reason for the punishments, did as Elsdon wished.

It was a few months after his birthday of manhood that he finally rebelled against his father. His rebellion was not out of any lessening feeling that he deserved the punishments; it was simply that he considered himself too old to endure such punishments at his father's hands. If punishment was needed, he told his father, then his father should give Elsdon over to the city's patrol soldiers so that Elsdon could receive his punishment as a man does.

His father said nothing; he simply gave his son a look that sent Elsdon into his sister's room, where he cried in her arms for several hours.

The next day Elsdon murdered her.

He could not remember afterwards what the cause of the quarrel was, though he was sure that it was nothing more than the type of argument brothers and sisters normally have. He had never had any other type of quarrel with his sister. Yet in the midst of it, the fury came suddenly upon him, and what followed was a dark tumbling of screams and pleas and his sister's blood upon his hands.

And then it was over, and as Elsdon crouched down beside Sara, desperately searching for signs of life, he knew, finally, what it was that his father had feared about him.

o—o—o

"He knew what I was, you see," Elsdon said in a broken voice. "Nobody else did. My schoolmasters thought I was bright-witted, and my friends thought I was kind and good. But he knew the truth. I remember once he told me it was a shame I'd inherited my mother's face. I thought at first he meant only that he wished I wasn't ugly, but it was more than that. He knew that the ugliness was in my essence. He saw how lack-witted I was, and how cowardly, and how vicious . . . Well, you know all this. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you."

The High Seeker did not speak for a time. He had remained motionless during the recitation, his gaze unwavering upon Elsdon's face, with no change of expression in his eyes to reveal what he thought. Now he said softly, "You appear to have a high opinion of my ability to know you. I erred about you on your first day here, as you'll recall."

"No." Elsdon shook his head vigorously. "You were right then. I didn't deliberately lie to you, but I did lie. I hate my father – I hate him as much as I must have hated Sara. It's a mercy he told the soldiers to arrest me, because I probably would have murdered him too, and anyone else who came my way." He forced himself to raise his head so that his gaze was level with the High Seeker's. "I'm sorry. I should have told you the truth the first day rather than force you to be patient with me, as my father was."

Mr. Smith's eyes were unblinking, like that of a serpent. "As it happens," he said coolly, "you are right that I know what you are. I have known what you are since the first day. The question is whether you are willing to listen to me if I tell you."

Elsdon's hands had been gripping each other. Now he brought his fists up to his lips and bowed his head over them. He nodded, a single jerk of the head.

"Will you believe me?" persisted Mr. Smith.

"Yes," whispered Elsdon. "You told me the truth about my execution."

"But will you believe that I have the skill to have discerned your essence during our short time together?"

"You've talked to me for nearly half the clock-hours of each day since I arrived," said Elsdon. "And even if you hadn't—" He stopped abruptly, and looked over at the third man in the cell.

Mr. Sobel had been perusing the pages he had written while Elsdon was giving his confession. Every now and then he crossed something out and scribbled in a correction. Now he raised his gaze from the papers. His eyes met Elsdon's; neither man spoke.

"Mr. Sobel," said the High Seeker, "will you wait outside, please?"

The guard left the cell silently. When the door closed, Elsdon said, "That's why you ordered Mr. Sobel to talk to me. To find out the truth about me."

"Is that the observation of a lack-witted man?"

The remark, coming as it did without warning, stung Elsdon as much as his father's beatings once had. He stared down at the ground, trying to blink away the moisture on the edges of his eyelids.

"You mistake me, Mr. Taylor." The High Seeker's voice remained as cool as before. "I am telling you that you should not have believed what your father told you about your lack-wittedness. I do not need to trust your schoolmasters' reports on this matter; you have demonstrated your intelligence since the moment of your arrival here."

"But my father knew me—"

"Knew that you were a coward? Mr. Taylor, I can assure you that, if there is any place in the world where cowardice reveals itself, it is in the Eternal Dungeon. You have shown a reasonable fear of what fate awaited you here, nothing more. As for your purported ugliness—"

The change came without warning: a deepening of the creases around the High Seeker's eyes. The smile was in his voice also as he said, "I don't think your looks are a matter which need cause you any distress, Mr. Taylor."

"But I'm vicious," Elsdon whispered. "Even if the rest of what you say is true, you *know* I'm a brutal man. I told you what I did to my sister."

The smile disappeared from Mr. Smith's eyes. "You are chained by darkness. I will not deny that. You have been in grave danger from your furies, and it is well that you recognize that. But there is more to you than viciousness, as you have demonstrated by giving your confession freely."

Elsdon shook his head slowly. His hands were still clutching each other beneath his chin. "You would have broken me anyway, with Mr. Sobel's help—"

"A breaking is about to occur," Mr. Smith said, "but it is not my breaking. Mr. Taylor, do you know why I sent Mr. Sobel to talk with you?"

"In order to search me so that he could give you the information you needed to break me—"

"No. The Code forbids guards from searching prisoners, nor do I know what conversations passed between you and Mr. Sobel."

The High Seeker reached out then and placed his palm against the wall, resting himself lightly against the grey stone. He said softly, "We have two basic methods of breaking, Mr. Taylor, and we use variations on these methods with all the prisoners. With prisoners who are uncooperative, we do our best to instill fear in them, making ourselves appear to be an enemy too fearsome to be held out against. Mr. Urman's report of your attack on Mr. Sobel led me to believe initially that you were such a prisoner; hence my effort to frighten you on the first day."

"And the cooperative prisoners?" Elsdon asked, his interest quickening despite his worries.

"We try to establish trust with them. We allow them to see that we are not their enemy, and though we cannot save most of the prisoners from the consequences of what they have done, we will endeavor to see that their fates are no worse than the law demands. That is why I sent Mr. Sobel to you, Mr. Taylor: so you would know that there is at least one person in this dungeon you can trust."

"I trust you."

Another change came into Mr. Smith's expression, but this one Elsdon could not read, nor could he read the shift in the High Seeker's body as Mr. Smith drew himself up rigid. He was as stiff now as he had been on the first day, and on most of the occasions since then.

"If you trust me," the High Seeker said, his voice turning from coolness to coldness, "do you trust me to tell you the truth about you? For though Mr. Sobel did not report to me his conversations with you, he did give me one piece of information that I felt would be invaluable in your breaking."

"What information?" Elsdon asked, his throat tightening. He pulled back once more, squeezing into the corner as though he might find refuge there.

"He said that you asked no questions about your own welfare; you asked only about the welfare of those who were imprisoning you." The High Seeker's voice grew soft. "That is the essence of what you are, Mr. Taylor. Your father lied to you. And that is why you hate your father: because he lied to you and abused you most brutally."

A dark wave, dashing itself upon a solid rock, shatters into a million teardrops and dissolves into the spray rising toward the sun. So it was with Elsdon; he felt his body racked over and over with the pain as he crouched down on the floor, sobbing. The bile was in his mouth again, but he barely noticed it. He was too busy feeling his bones shatter from the impact of the storm-wave.

He did not notice Mr. Smith move toward the door. But when he heard Mr. Sobel quietly speak his name, he leaned to the side with an old instinct for comfort, and in the next moment, Mr. Sobel's arm hugged his shoulders.

The squeak of door-hinges made him look up finally. Through the spray of his tears, he could see a blurry image of the High Seeker, who was on the point of stepping into the corridor. Mr. Smith paused to look back at him, saying, "I need to visit the Record-keeper about some documentwork. I will see you tomorrow in the magistrates' court, Mr. Taylor."

And then he was gone, and Elsdon's sobs began to batter him again with renewed force.

"Stupid," he managed to choke out. "I'm so stupid. . . ."

"Don't say that," Mr. Sobel replied. "You were only a young child when the beatings began; you couldn't have been expected to understand what was taking place."

"Not that. The High Seeker. I made a fool of myself in front of him. You saw how he left as soon as he could. . . ."

"Hush, now." Mr. Sobel handed Elsdon a handkerchief. "Don't you think Mr. Smith has seen prisoners break themselves before? Why do you think we call these the breaking cells?" His hand rose up to wipe a tear from Elsdon's cheek. "It will be all right now."

"No, it won't," Elsdon said between sobs that threatened to choke him. "I killed my sister, and tomorrow I'll die."

He expected Mr. Sobel to reply. When the guard didn't, Elsdon lifted his face toward him. Mr. Sobel's expression was drawn into tight lines, as though he were straining against a great heaviness.

He said nothing, but continued to hold Elsdon until the dark wave lay shattered upon the rock, and Elsdon could cry no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

The judging room turned out to be located in the palace that sprawled above the Eternal Dungeon. This was Elsdon's first visit to the Queen's palace, other than during his journey to the dungeon; his terror at the torture to come had made him oblivious to his surroundings upon his arrival. Now, as he walked along the palace corridors, escorted by Mr. Sobel and Mr. Urman, his gaze lingered upon the marble columns, the mosaic floors, and the gilded plaster. He wished he would have had more than one chance to see it.

His hands were free as he walked. The guards had not bound him or even hooded him; Mr. Sobel had asked him once more to close his eyes while they traversed the dungeon, and he had gratefully done so. Now he did his best to store whatever images came to him in his remaining time. No windows existed in this part of the palace, which he regretted; he would have liked to have seen the sky again. But most likely this would all end as it had begun: in the narrow confines of a cell.

They reached a door guarded by palace soldiers, dressed in their ceremonial finery: an old-fashioned sword at one hip, a practical revolver at the other. Within the room, more soldiers stood, scrutinizing Elsdon as he entered. His guards withdrew, so swiftly that Elsdon did not have time to say goodbye to Mr. Sobel. He looked around uncertainly, trying to figure out what he should do next.

The judging room was very plain, only a few benches facing a gilded table upon a platform. The magistrate was already seated at the table; he was an elderly man with hollow cheeks and a no-nonsense look in his eyes. He was carrying on a low-voiced conversation with what appeared to be the magisterial recorder. The magistrate's voice was brisk as he spoke.

Aside from the guards, no one else was in the room, nor was there any indication of where Elsdon should sit. He looked hesitantly at the soldiers, wondering whether he should ask their help or whether he should wait for Mr. Smith to arrive, who would no doubt answer any questions he had.

A hand fell upon his shoulder.

He spun in desperate fervor, pushing hard with his hands before he could see who his assailant was. He caught a glimpse of his father stumbling back, and then a soldier was running forward, his sword unsheathed. The sword was pointed at Elsdon.

Elsdon stood rooted, feeling himself grow cold with awareness that, despite all his preparations during the night, he was not yet ready to die. And then a body stepped between himself and the approaching sword – a dark-clothed body, wearing a hood.

When he spoke, the High Seeker ignored the soldier, who had halted and was now sheathing his sword. In a quiet voice, Mr. Smith said to Elsdon's father, "Sir, I must ask that you make no contact with the prisoner. It is not permitted for witnesses against the prisoner to do so."

"He's my son!" Elsdon's father somehow managed to direct toward Elsdon a hurt expression at the same time as he gave Mr. Smith a bewildered look. "I was only trying to see whether he's been well treated."

"He has been treated well since his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon." Mr. Smith's voice was cool. "I would suggest that you seat yourself, sir. The judging is about to begin."

Elsdon looked over his shoulder at the gilded table and saw that the magistrate had been watching this exchange with narrowed eyes. Elsdon felt his breath being pushed back into his chest. He remained frozen like a bird under a predator's gaze until he heard the High Seeker murmur, "You may seat yourself where you wish."

Cautiously, Elsdon sought out a bench, choosing the one that was as far as possible from his father. His father gave an amiable but respectful nod to the magistrate. Elsdon's stomach sickened.

The High Seeker remained standing a couple of yards away from Elsdon. The magistrate glanced at him and said, "We're all here, I think. Who is our first witness?" He looked over at the magisterial recorder.

"Captain Farjeon!" the recorder cried, pitching his voice to be heard throughout the room.

One of the soldiers strode forward; he looked vaguely familiar to Elsdon. Pausing in the clear space between the benches and the table, he said without preliminary, "On the first day of the month, I and three of my men were on patrol in the Parkside district of the city. A young boy ran to us and told us that a girl was screaming in a house nearby. At about the same time, we heard the screams ourselves. We ran forward, but were hindered in our path by well-meaning subjects of our Queen, who had heard the screams also and wished to alert us. By the time we reached the front of the house in question, the screams had stopped. A small crowd of young women, wishing to investigate the source of the cries, had gathered at the front of the house, but they were unable to gain entry, as the front door was locked. We saw a man running toward the house from one of the neighbors' houses. He identified himself hurriedly as the owner of the house and said that the screams must have come from his daughter. He permitted us entrance to the house and showed us to his daughter's room. There we found a girl, fourteen years of age, lying bleeding on the floor. She had been badly battered; her face was barely recognizable, and her limbs were broken in several places. She had been punched repeatedly in the chest and pelvis. We have submitted the prison doctor's report if you have need of it. The prison doctor later confirmed that the girl had been killed by her injuries. Next to the girl we found the prisoner, who was kneeling beside her, his hand on her throat. He had some of the girl's blood on his shirt and shoes and knuckles. We arrested the prisoner and delivered him to Parkside Prison for searching."

The magistrate glanced at the recorder to see whether he had finished writing all this down, then asked, in a voice as thin and rasping as sandpaper, "Did the prisoner say anything during the time that he was in your custody?"

"Nothing, sir. We did ask him whether he was the girl's assailant, but he didn't respond. His eyes were unfocussed, and I'm not sure whether he heard what we were saying."

The magistrate nodded and turned his gaze toward the High Seeker. "Does the Eternal Dungeon have any questions for the witness?"

"We would like to know," Mr. Smith said quietly, "whether the victim's father spoke, beyond what has been reported."

The magistrate raised his eyebrows at the soldier, who said, "I don't really remember, sir. I think he said something like, 'Oh, my heart, she's dead!' Then he said to the prisoner, 'Son, how could you do such a terrible thing?' I believe that the victim's father was questioned afterwards by Parkside Prison, but we had no further contact with him."

"Good." The magistrate seemed pleased at this shortening of the procedure. "The next witness is . . ." He looked over at the recorder.

The recorder consulted his notes. "Auburn Taylor!" he cried.

Elson's father appeared startled, as though he had not expected to be called upon, but he quickly rose and walked forward to where the soldier had stood before. He cleared his throat and said, "I'm not sure what you want me to say, sir."

"Just tell us what you know of this matter," the magistrate responded tersely.

"Nothing, sir, beyond what has been said already. It was so great a shock to me . . . Such a beautiful and gentle daughter she was . . . And I never would have guessed that my own son . . . Mind you, he has been violent before. The neighbors could tell you that. He throws things."

"Is that in the records?" the magistrate interrupted.

The recorder shuffled through the papers and said, "It's in the report of the Parkside Prison healer. The prisoner's medical records indicate that he was treated by the neighborhood healer on several occasions, at the father's request. The prisoner stated to the healer that he had received the injuries while engaging in violent behavior toward objects in his house. The father confirmed that objects had been broken."

"Let me see that." The magistrate took the report and pondered it as Elsdon bit his lip, struggling to keep down the sickness that had been rising in his throat since the soldier's testimony. After a moment the magistrate raised his eyes and said, "Does the Eternal Dungeon wish to question the witness?"

"We do not," the High Seeker replied.

"Do you have anything else to add, Mr. Taylor?"

"No, sir, I had no idea this was going to happen. Perhaps I should have guessed . . . He lied to me sometimes after his violent spells, telling me that other people had caused the damage . . . Once he even blamed his sister . . . But really, how could I have guessed that he'd murder a sweet girl—"

"No more witness to give. Very well, thank you." The magistrate dismissed Elsdon's father from his view, and after a moment Auburn Taylor retreated, flicking a glance toward Elsdon as he did so. Elsdon shrank back and looked over at the hooded man beside him. Mr. Smith was watching him, but said nothing.

"Will Parkside Prison be offering witness?" The magistrate looked over at the soldier who had unsheathed his sword earlier.

"We will not, sir." The soldier did not move from where he stood by the wall. He too looked familiar, though Elsdon could not dredge forth the memory. "By request of the victim's father, no searching was done of the prisoner by us, and all evidence we received from the victim's father was turned over to the Eternal Dungeon."

"Good." The magistrate sounded even more pleased. He was already glancing at the ticking clock in the corner, as though gauging how little time he could devote to the remainder of the judging. "That leaves us with the Eternal Dungeon. Mr. Smith, I assume that you have brought a statement from the prisoner, or we would not be here."

"It is in the recorder's hands, sir."

The recorder was already placing papers on the desk before the magistrate. The magistrate made no effort to read them but pulled the last page out of the pile, glanced at it, and held it up in Elsdon's direction.

"Mr. Taylor," he said, "have you seen this document before?"

"Yes, sir." Elsdon's voice emerged as a whisper.

"Please stand, Mr. Taylor, and come forward. I don't like having to shout across the room."

Elsdon's face grew warm. He rose quickly and stumbled his way past the rows of benches until he reached the open space. The magistrate watched him come forward, a tinge of impatience showing in his eyes.

"Now, then," said the magistrate slowly, as though he were addressing a small child. "Have you seen this document before?"

"Yes, sir." Elsdon's voice emerged too loud this time, causing his ears to burn. "Mr. Sobel – my guard – wrote down the words I spoke to Mr. Smith – the High Seeker – and this is the inked copy of his notes."

"And did you read afterwards what Mr. Sobel had written?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Sobel showed me the inked copy and asked me whether he had written my words correctly."

"And you agreed that he had."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Sobel had me sign the statement."

The magistrate's look of impatience increased a notch, as though he were unused to prisoners volunteering information. In the same carefully spaced voice, he said, "And is this your signature? If you cannot see the document well enough, you may come forward."

"I can see it, sir. It's my signature."

"Hmm." The magistrate drummed his fingers for a moment, glanced at the clock, and said, "Now, then, Mr. Taylor, I am about to ask you a set of very important questions. I want you to understand that, if you answer yes to any of the questions, you will not need to fear repercussions from the Seeker who questioned you. I will place you in the custody of the Eternal Dungeon's Codifier, who will in turn be under the supervision of the magistrates during the time of any necessary investigation. Do you understand? No, Mr. Taylor, don't nod; answer me."

"I understand, sir."

"Good." The magistrate laid the papers down, folded his hands atop them, and leaned forward, saying, "Did you sign this statement out of fear of torture or any other adverse consequence if you did not?"

"No, sir."

"Were you threatened by anyone in the Eternal Dungeon if you did not sign the statement?"

"No, sir. I was well treated by everyone there."

"Were you promised any rewards if you signed the statement?"

"No, sir." He felt his throat close. "I know that the penalty for what I did is death, sir. Nobody in the Eternal Dungeon lied to me and told me otherwise."

"Hmm." The magistrate contemplated Elsdon's signature for a moment before saying, "One last question, Mr. Taylor. I know that you've just given me the answer, but I want to be clear here. You understand that the penalty for a crime such as you have been said to have committed is death by hanging?"

"Yes." Elsdon felt the sickness begin to rise again, and he swallowed. "Sir, I was wondering . . ."

The magistrate, who had been looking over at the clock, raised his eyebrows.

"Would it be possible for me to receive death by some other means?" Elsdon asked in a rush.

The magistrate's eyebrows remained raised.

"I don't like ropes, sir," Elsdon said in a low voice.

The magistrate shuffled the papers together and stacked them neatly before handing them to the recorder. "Death by hanging is the penalty prescribed," he said. "Do you have any other questions?"

Elsdon shook his head slowly.

"Fine. The confession, please." He looked over at the recorder.

The recorder, with a spark to his eye that suggested this was his favorite part of judgings, began to read Elsdon's confession in a clear, rapid voice.

He had not proceeded far before Elsdon's father leapt to his feet, causing his bench to crash to the ground. "That's a lie!" he shouted.

The soldier closest to Elsdon's father loosened his sword in its sheath. Auburn Taylor caught sight of the movement at the moment he was taking a step toward Elsdon. He hesitated.

"Mr. Taylor," the magistrate said dryly, "you will be permitted to respond once the confession has been read. Kindly remain silent until then."

Elsdon's father began to sink down into his seat, realized at the last moment that his bench was toppled, and switched to another seat. He did not speak for the remainder of the recital, though his lips moved and his face turned fiery red.

"You confirm that this is your witness?" the magistrate asked Elsdon when he was through.

Elsdon nodded. He was having a hard time keeping from looking back to see whether his father was storming toward him. The magistrate coughed, made a note to himself with broad scratches of his pen, and then turned to Elsdon's father, saying, "You wish to respond, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon's father walked forward. Elsdon backed away as far as he could within the cleared space, but his father ignored him. Speaking carefully, with no sign of anger, his father said, "Sir, I think there must be some mistake here. I won't say that my son deliberately lied – though he does have a history of that – but I think his mind must have been muddled during his imprisonment. Possibly it was the torture that did it."

The magistrate looked away from Elsdon's father. "Mr. Smith?"

Elsdon turned his head and found that the High Seeker was standing next to him. Mr. Smith said, "The prisoner was tortured only once, on his first day of imprisonment. He was informed thereafter that he would not be punished again. He showed no signs of mental distress during the searching, beyond that which he had shown since his arrival. He made his statement on the fifth day of imprisonment."

"Hmm." The magistrate looked for a moment as though he were going to turn his attention to the clock to ask its witness. Instead he said to Elsdon,

"You confirm what you said before, that you provided this statement freely?"

"Yes."

He could not manage to raise his voice above a whisper, but the magistrate seemed satisfied. Turning back to the High Seeker, he said, "Mr. Smith, you would not have submitted this statement unless you believed it to be true. Does the Eternal Dungeon have any witness to offer concerning this case?"

"Two small matters, sir; it is for you to judge whether they are significant." The High Seeker's voice was cool. "From the prisoner's reactions to the punishment placed upon him during his first day, we believe, based on our prior experience in these matters, that the prisoner has been bound and beaten in the past. His legal records show no evidence that he has been arrested before or that he received such punishment during his schooling."

"The boys in our neighborhood are a tough lot," Elsdon's father said. "No doubt they played rough games with my son. That doesn't excuse what he did to my daughter—"

"Mr. Taylor, the Eternal Dungeon is giving witness." The magistrate turned back to the High Seeker. "And the other matter you mentioned, Mr. Smith?"

"Upon arrival, the prisoner assaulted a guard when the guard unexpectedly placed his hand upon the prisoner's shoulder. The door to the cell lay open and unguarded at the time, but the prisoner made no attempt to escape, nor did he continue his assault after his initial quick reaction. The guard reported the assault as being 'reflexive.' All of the prisoner's subsequent behavior toward the guard suggests that the prisoner was indeed reacting in a reflexive manner to a perceived danger. Sir, if we might point you to the passage on the second page of the confession, which we have circled."

There followed a moment of consultation between the magistrate and the recorder; then the recorder read aloud, "'He never gives any sign that he's angry. He just comes into my room while I'm sitting at my desk and puts his hand on me in a friendly manner—'"

"Thank you, that is the passage in question." The High Seeker's voice remained cool. "Sir, before this judging started, the prisoner demonstrated violent behavior toward his father. Did you happen to witness the initial cause of that assault?"

The magistrate's face demonstrated that he had. He picked up his pen and began scribbling on his paper.

"This is rattlepated!" cried Elsdon's father. "Of course I greeted my son by touching him; I was concerned for his welfare. And you saw for yourself what a danger he has become—"

"Mr. Taylor!" The magistrate's voice turned crisp. "I have given you several opportunities to follow our procedures in this judging. The next time you speak without permission I will have you expelled from this room." He nodded to a soldier, who came forward, his hand on his sword hilt.

Elsdon's father, eyeing the soldier, made no reply. The magistrate turned to Mr. Smith and said, "Does the Eternal Dungeon wish to submit a request to the lesser prisons for a searching of Mr. Taylor concerning the crimes he is said to have committed against the prisoner? Or do you wish to search him yourself concerning the death of his wife, that being a death-sentence matter?"

Elsdon's father drew in his breath swiftly, then looked at the soldier and shut his lips tight.

Mr. Smith replied, "Sir, the Eternal Dungeon has given consideration to this matter. I have consulted with the Codifier, and he does not believe there is sufficient evidence to permit an arrest in the matter of Mr. Taylor's wife; nor does he believe it likely that the magistrates would accept evidence offered by the prisoner concerning crimes committed against him. This being the case, the Eternal Dungeon has sent a note to Parkside Prison, requesting that a special watch be placed upon Mr. Taylor's activities, in case any troubles arise in the future."

The magistrate glanced at the soldier from Parkside Prison, as though to check whether he wished to comment, then nodded and said, "In that case, the prisoner's witness against his father is of no importance in deciding

this matter. You do understand that, don't you?" he said to Elsdon. "I can only dismiss the charges against you if witness is provided that you were provoked to commit the crime by the victim, or encouraged to do so by another party. Do you wish to offer witness of that sort?"

"No." Elsdon's voice was low. "Nobody told me to kill Sara, and she wasn't at fault for what happened. She was innocent, and I—"

His voice broke. He shoved the back of his hand against his mouth, trying to push back the sickness there. There was a moment's pause; out of the corner of his eye, Elsdon saw that his father was now relaxed.

"Do you have anything else to add before I pass sentence?" the magistrate asked.

With his hand still pressed against his mouth, Elsdon shook his head.

"Mr. Taylor? You may speak now, if you wish."

"No need." Elsdon's father spoke firmly. "I trust you to make the right decision in my son's case."

The magistrate glanced at the clock and gave a sigh of satisfaction. "Mr. Smith?" he said perfunctorily.

"Sir, the Eternal Dungeon wishes to retain custody of the prisoner."

There was a stirring in the room; several of the soldiers glanced at one another. Elsdon forgot about his sickness and stared at the black-hooded man beside him.

The magistrate gave another sigh, this one heavy. "Do we have the proper documentwork for that?" he asked the recorder.

"It was submitted by the High Seeker upon his arrival here." The recorder passed some papers over to the magistrate.

"Hmm." The magistrate perused them, leafing through them carefully.

"What—?"

A sword hissed as it was released from its sheath. The magistrate looked up and said with ill-concealed impatience, "You have a question, Mr.

Taylor?"

"What is being talked about here?" Elsdon's father glared at the soldier holding the naked sword toward him before switching his attention back to the magistrate. "I thought this was a death-sentence case. Is my son to be executed in the Eternal Dungeon, then?"

The magistrate glanced over at Elsdon, who was sure his own bewilderment must be scribed upon his face, for the magistrate proceeded to say slowly, "Executions cannot be carried out by the magistrates unless the Eternal Dungeon releases prisoners into our custody. If a prisoner is judged guilty of a death-sentence crime, and if the Eternal Dungeon believes that the prisoner may have committed crimes beyond that with which he has been charged, the Eternal Dungeon may hold the prisoner indefinitely, in case further evidence is received concerning the crimes. Once the death sentence is passed, the Eternal Dungeon may retain custody of the prisoner only on condition that the prisoner receive eternal confinement within the walls of the Eternal Dungeon. That is the case here, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, sir." The High Seeker's tone was matter-of-fact. "Given the evidence that has been submitted by the prisoner's father concerning the prisoner's violent tendencies, we believe it is possible that the prisoner engaged in other criminal acts. We intend to place the prisoner in confinement until we ascertain the truth in this matter. When the prisoner finally dies, whether due to execution for his crimes or due to old age or any other cause, his ashes will be buried within the dungeon eternally."

"Do you wish to submit a protest of the Eternal Dungeon's decision, Mr. Taylor?" asked the magistrate. "You may petition the Magisterial Guild on this matter, since you are the victim's father."

Auburn Taylor's gaze drifted over to Elsdon, who was sure he must now be white-faced, and then to the hooded man standing next to him. A smile floated softly across his face, like mist.

"No need," he told the magistrate. "I'm sure that my son will be in good hands with the Seekers. Perhaps they will succeed in extracting any information on other crimes he has committed."

"Good." The magistrate slapped the papers down onto the table with finality. "Elsdon Taylor, for the murder of Sara Taylor, I sentence you to be hanged by your neck until you are dead. Where is that document again?" He turned to the recorder, who leaned over and leafed through the papers on the desk until he found the proper one. The magistrate read through the paper, scribbled something onto it, and said, "Mr. Smith, since you will not release the prisoner into our custody, you retain control in this matter. If at any time you should release the prisoner, his sentence will be carried out. If you do not release the prisoner, he will remain confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions you deem necessary. Judging completed." He stood up swiftly and had left the room by a door in the back before Elsdon was able to draw his next breath.

The judging room emptied more quickly than he would have imagined possible: the recorder followed in the wake of the magistrate, while the soldiers began to leave the room without a backwards glance. Elsdon's father looked as though he wished to linger, but as he took a step toward Elsdon, the soldier from Parkside Prison halted by his side. "A word with you, sir," the soldier said firmly and pulled Auburn Taylor from the room.

Elsdon looked over at the only remaining man in the room. He could see nothing but the eyes, which were bare of all emotion. "Thank you," Elsdon said softly.

"Not at all." The High Seeker's tone was as matter-of-fact as before. "We retain custody of prisoners whenever the evidence permits it. I think the magistrates would grow weary of this, except that it saves them the expense of an executioner. The Eternal Dungeon is run under a separate budget." He gestured toward the door.

After a moment's hesitation, Elsdon led the way out of the room. The corridors were empty now, except for the marble columns, the mosaic floors, and the gilded plaster.

CHAPTER FIVE

He remembered the way back to the gates leading down to the cavern of the Eternal Dungeon. Mr. Smith stayed a few steps behind him, so that Elsdon had the illusion he was walking back of his own free will, unbound by any force. The feeling washed through him like a cool breeze on a sweltering day.

Only when they reached the heavily guarded gates did Mr. Smith step forward. Elsdon followed him past the three sets of guards, who seemed unsurprised by his reappearance. Nor, when they arrived at the Record-keeper's desk, did Mr. Aaron show any special interest in Elsdon. Instead he turned his gaze to Mr. Smith, who said, "Mr. Taylor requires the oath of eternal commitment."

The Record-keeper pushed forward three pieces of paper that were already at his elbow. "Read it through carefully," he told Elsdon. "If you agree to the oath, sign all three copies at the bottom."

Elsdon looked down at the first piece of paper. His name, he saw, was already filled in.

> I, Elsdon Taylor, do swear on this day that I will remain eternally confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions the High Seeker deems necessary. Except with permission of the Codifier, I will not leave these walls before my death, and I understand that after my death my ashes will be buried here. I will never return to the lighted world. I will obey the *Code of Seeking*, and if I should break the Code or know of anyone else who breaks the Code, I will report the matter to the Codifier. I will obey all orders given to me by the High Seeker, except those which would conflict with the *Code of Seeking*. I understand that, in any case where my best interests come into conflict with the best interests of a prisoner who is being searched, the prisoner's best interests must be followed. I am willing to suffer for the sake of the prisoners.

He read the oath twice, feeling both times as though someone was slicing

through his bonds. Then he picked up the pen proffered to him by the Record-keeper and signed the papers.

The Record-keeper took two of the pages and pushed the third toward him. "This is your copy," he said, and turned immediately to say to the guard who was entering through a door to the right, "Mr. Sobel! I have not yet received your report on your last prisoner!"

"Sorry," the guard replied cheerfully. "I'll take care of it before my shift tonight. —Trial go well?" he asked Elsdon.

Elsdon nodded.

"Thought it would," said Mr. Sobel. "I'll see you later." He walked past the ceiling-high tablet and disappeared through a door to the left.

Elsdon looked around and saw that Mr. Smith was standing by the open doorway through which Mr. Sobel had entered; it was flanked by guards. Stuffing the copy of the oath into his pocket, Elsdon hurried to catch up. He opened his mouth to ask whether he should close his eyes for this part of the journey, but Mr. Smith was already striding up the doorway's steps to a dark corridor.

The corridor, which ran left-right to the doorway, was filled with smoke and the roar of flames. Coughing, Elsdon strove to catch up with the swift High Seeker, who had turned left. Dimly through the smoke he could see figures next to black piles, thrusting shovels into the piles and then throwing the contents into recesses in the left-hand wall.

As he and the High Seeker reached the first figure, Elsdon peered cautiously into the recess next to him. A fire burned furiously within a narrow channel between two walls. Part of its heat was travelling down into a tunnel beneath the walls, while the remainder of its heat and light travelled upward. Seeing the thick glass sparkling on the far wall, Elsdon suddenly realized what this was.

The man who had been shovelling paused a moment, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was dressed in a laborer's smock, but he grinned in a familiar fashion at Mr. Smith, who had paused

when Elsdon did. "'Morning, Mr. Smith!" he said. "I didn't know you were ever awake in the daytime."

"Good morning," Mr. Smith replied. "How is the work coming?"

"Good." The laborer gave a nod of satisfaction. "That coal you recommended from Vovim is working out well."

"I'm glad to hear it," replied Mr. Smith. "We don't want the prisoners to freeze, do we?"

"Not unless that's the new torture you've thought up for them!" The laborer roared with laughter. The other laborers, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, joined the merriment. The High Seeker made no attempt to share in the humor. He nodded, then continued down the corridor, followed by Elsdon.

They walked quite a ways. The furnace area, it appeared, stretched for much of the length of the Eternal Dungeon. Feeling suddenly shy, Elsdon said nothing as they walked, and Mr. Smith appeared similarly disinclined to talk. They passed doors along the right-hand wall, but the High Seeker ignored the doors. Not until they reached the end of the corridor did he turn to the last of the doors, pulling a chain of keys from an inner pocket of his shirt. With one smooth move he unbolted the lock, then ushered Elsdon through the doorway.

Elsdon travelled down a short passage, stepped across a second doorway, and found himself surrounded by people.

None of them took notice of him or the High Seeker. They were all hurrying back and forth through a corridor that ran parallel with the furnace corridor. This corridor, though, was lighted with lamps that brightened the place so much that it seemed day-lit. Some of the people held objects in their arms: bundles of clothing, great baskets of food, buckets and mops, children . . . Elsdon blinked, and suddenly he realized that half the people passing him were women. He looked over at the High Seeker and cried, "This isn't the Eternal Dungeon!"

"Certainly it is," Mr. Smith replied calmly. "It's the most important part of our world, the outer dungeon. In many ways, the inhabitants of the inner

dungeon – the Seekers and guards – are the least important members of the Eternal Dungeon. If we ceased to do our jobs for a few days, nobody but our prisoners would notice, but if the hundreds of men and women who keep this place running through their labor failed to do their work, the Eternal Dungeon would quickly die."

Elsdon looked at one of the passing baskets; it held the same yellow apples he had been fed in his cell. Then he moved back toward the doorway to avoid being crashed into by a small boy and girl who were racing down the corridor, laughing. "You have children here too?" Elsdon said.

"Not many," replied Mr. Smith. "We discourage them from being raised here; it's not the proper environment in which to grow up, and we have a problem with overcrowding, as you can see. The Codifier permits a few young families to remain here, though."

Looking around, Elsdon saw what the High Seeker meant about the overcrowding. The corridor was packed nearly to bursting with the dwellers of the outer dungeon, and the doors along the corridor were so narrowly placed next to one another that Elsdon guessed the apartments within them must be quite small. He began to suspect that the cell he had found so confining was one of the largest spaces within the Eternal Dungeon.

Which led his thoughts to what lay next. Turning to Mr. Smith, he said, "Mr. Sobel told me that he would be seeing me later. Does that mean he'll be my guard?"

"The final arrangements for your confinement are still being ordered," replied the High Seeker. "In any case, this isn't the proper place to discuss such matters."

As he spoke, he flicked his hands toward the guards flanking the doorway to the inner dungeon, whom Elsdon had not noticed in his excitement. Turning the chain in his hands to a new key, the High Seeker stepped across the corridor. He unlocked the door in the wall opposite, then opened it wide, looking back at Elsdon. After a moment's hesitation, Elsdon stepped across the corridor and through the new doorway.

He found himself in a small room crammed with objects. A kitchen area lay to the right. Though no stove stood in the room, nor any sink or pump, there were storage bins; the ones that were open were filled with hard bread and dried fruit and other such long-lasting edibles. Some fresh cheese and fruit lay upon a shelf, protected by a glass cover, and on the narrow table sat a pitcher of water and a basin.

Immediately next to this portion of the room, cheek to jowl, was a living area with a cushioned bench facing a cushioned chair. The walls behind the bench held a series of sideboards surmounted with bookshelves, with a smattering of volumes lying upon the latter. A compact writing desk with an accompanying stool was tucked into the corner.

The living area, tiny though it was, took up most of the space in the room. Only at the far left of the room was a bed folded up against the wall, next to a small cupboard that Elsdon guessed must contain the chamber-pot.

He looked again at the High Seeker, still standing in the doorway, who said, "The Record-keeper has not yet assigned you permanent quarters, so you'll remain here for a day or so. This is our guest apartment for people newly arrived to the outer dungeon."

Elsdon's gaze went over to the door again. It was half-closed, and he could see that the door's lock could be opened from the inside.

For a moment, he felt too dizzy to speak. Then he looked back at Mr. Smith and said gravely, "Thank you. I won't violate your trust in me; I won't try to escape."

The High Seeker nodded as he stepped in and closed the door. "Feel free to make use of anything you find in this place," he said. "You'll want to get some rest, of course. I don't suppose you slept much last night."

Elsdon gave a quirk of a smile. "I didn't sleep at all."

"I hope the noise in the corridor doesn't disturb you, then. It takes time to become used to the living conditions of the Eternal Dungeon. Did you have any feeling of oppression when you first arrived here, because you were travelling underground?"

"No," said Elsdon, his brow puckered with thought. "That never occurred to me. Do some of your prisoners dislike being underground?"

"I couldn't say, but I certainly found it difficult to make the adjustment myself. I'd lived all my life aboveground, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd be crushed to death, either by the earth above or by the crowds around me."

This unexpected revelation left Elsdon speechless for a moment. Finally he said, "That must make it hard for you. I suppose you visit the broad, open spaces of the lighted world whenever you can."

"Whenever I can, yes." The High Seeker walked past him to the bookshelves and took a black-bound volume into his hand, saying, "If you should grow bored, you might want to peruse this. You'll need to know the contents."

Elsdon took the book from him and looked down at the title stamped in gold upon the cover. "Yes," he said slowly, "I'm eager to read this anyway. Mr. Sobel made your Code sound interesting. I'll do my best to finish this before I have to leave here." He looked up as he stopped speaking, and his voice caught.

Standing beside him was a man with a face. His eyes were the color of summer leaves, and his coloring was a pale yellow-brown. He looked to be fairly young, in his thirties. He had high cheekbones that gave him a somewhat foreign appearance, but otherwise he had quite an ordinary look to him. Elsdon might have passed him on the street without taking notice.

His expression held a stiff formality that reminded Elsdon of a voice that had become familiar to him. It took him a moment to notice that the face was framed by black cloth that covered the sides and back of the head.

Elsdon's gaze travelled up to where the cloth that had hidden the face was flung back over the head, pinned in place by two clips. With the cloth back, it could be seen that a frame held the hood snugly against the head. The frame tucked its way around the area above the eyebrows and presumably followed the same course round to the back of the head.

Suddenly the stiffness in the mouth relaxed into what might have been the beginning of a smile, if it had not been so faint. "We do have faces, Mr. Taylor," the High Seeker said. "I know that children are commonly put to bed with scare-tales about faceless Seekers."

"I'm sorry." Elsdon swallowed. "I didn't mean to stare. I just didn't realize that Seekers were allowed to raise their hoods around prisoners."

"We're not allowed to lift our face-cloths when we're in public," Mr. Smith replied. "It's part of our uniform, which we must wear at all times; it helps to keep our relations with the other dungeon inhabitants on a professional level. However, when we're in private with friends or neighbors, we are permitted to show our faces."

Elsdon couldn't speak for a minute; he stared down at his shoes. Finally he looked up and said diffidently, "I'm glad you think of me in that way, as a neighbor. I – I'm starting to think of the Eternal Dungeon like that. As a place to live, not just a place to be imprisoned."

The High Seeker made no reply. After a moment Elsdon added in a rush, "I know that's silly."

"Not at all." Mr. Smith's voice was, as always, cool and formal. "I'm glad you consider this to be your new home. It's how we like all of the eternally confined to regard it." He took a step backwards and said, "I must leave, I'm afraid; I have only a few hours to sleep before I resume my duties. I'll return at dawn, if you believe you'll be awake then."

"Probably," said Elsdon with a smile. "I think you've switched me over to being awake with the night, like a bat."

"Waking hours tend to be arbitrary in a place with no sunlight. Do you have any questions before I leave?" He eyed the silent young man before him, then said, "Mr. Taylor, I hope that at this stage of our acquaintance I need not tell you that you can be honest with me."

Elsdon gave an awkward laugh. "I'm sorry, I just— I was wondering whether, when I'm confined, I'll be permitted to see you again. I'd – I'd miss you if I couldn't talk with you again."

The High Seeker turned his eyes away suddenly, as he was wont to do when he was searching Elsdon. He was silent so long that Elsdon felt his face grow warm, and then reach the point of burning. At last the High Seeker looked back and said quietly, "If you wish to see me, then certainly we may meet. We'll speak more tomorrow."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night." And then the High Seeker's face was hidden again as he left Elsdon in the tiny, unlocked apartment.

o—o—o

Eighteen hours later, Elsdon was in the same position he had held for virtually every moment of eight hours: curled up in the armchair, staring down at the pages of the *Code of Seeking*.

He was only one-quarter of the way through the slim volume. Every time he read a sentence, he found himself going back and rereading it over and over, and then he would fall into a meditation, and then he would read the sentence again. Once he brought the book's binding up to his nose to breathe in the scent of leather; then he placed his cheek against the cover, which was warm from his hands. His limbs felt relaxed and his spine curved with comfortable ease against the soft cushions. He could not remember having felt this way since before his mother's death.

The sound of a knock startled him out of his dreaming. Cautiously he walked to the door and opened it. On the threshold stood Mr. Smith.

The High Seeker did not speak until the door was closed again. Then he glanced at the book, which was lying open upon the chair. "You've found a way to occupy yourself, I see."

Elsdon nodded. "There's so much in it; it's hard to absorb it all." He hesitated. Mr. Smith had not raised the face-cloth of his hood, and Elsdon's ears turned warm as he recalled how their last conversation had ended.

"Did any portion of the book interest you above the rest?" Mr. Smith asked.

"The rule that Seekers may not touch prisoners."

He had spoken spontaneously; too late, he thought that this remark must reveal his lack-wittedness, for surely, among all he had read, this had to be one of the least important passages. But Mr. Smith nodded and said, "A difficult rule for any Seeker to follow, particularly when the prisoner is distressed by his searching."

"Is that why you left the cell when I was crying?" The words leapt out of Elsdon, unconstrained by caution.

If there was any change in the High Seeker's expression, the hood hid it. "It seemed a matter best handled by Mr. Sobel, since you had come to trust him."

"But I trust you also. I told you that before."

Mr. Smith gazed upon him unblinking, the hood-shadow darkening his eyes. "I am glad to hear that. You are about to learn that that trust is mutual. Will you come with me, please?"

He gestured toward the door. Elsdon looked at the book on the chair before reluctantly closing it upon his bookmark. As he did so, he caught sight, for the first time, of the title page, and of the name written there. His breath whistled in, and he looked at the High Seeker, but Mr. Smith said nothing, and so Elsdon left the black-bound book behind, along with the brightly-furnished apartment and the unlocked door.

They made their way back through the furnace corridor between the inner and outer dungeon, and through the entry hall where the Record-keeper was absorbed with taking down information about a newly arrived prisoner, and then they reached the door which, Elsdon knew, must lead to the breaking cells.

"Should I shut my eyes?" he asked.

His hand on the latch, Mr. Smith looked back at him. "There's no need," he said, too softly to be heard by the men standing nearby. "We hood prisoners who are being searched because we would prefer they not see the corridor that leads to the cells. It wouldn't confirm the scene of terror the prisoners expect."

Elsdon could see why, once they had begun travelling down the new corridor. It was dimly lit, but the lights were ordinary oil lamps attached in a quite ordinary way to the walls. The walls themselves were plastered, and were painted a deep green that matched the eyes of the High Seeker; the floor was of wood and was polished to a shine. The Eternal Dungeon, it turned out, looked like Elsdon's old school-hall.

Some of the doorways they passed were flanked by guards, but Mr. Smith stopped at a guardless door. As he opened it with his set of keys, Elsdon glanced up at the number painted above the door, and he felt his heart jerk. He looked over at the High Seeker, who was holding the door wide open for him.

"I'm to have my old cell?" He wished that his voice sounded steadier.

The High Seeker shook his head. "I needed a place for a test. A new prisoner has not yet been assigned to this cell." As he spoke, he pulled something from his belt, and Elsdon realized, with another jerk of the heart, that Mr. Smith was carrying a whip.

If the High Seeker noticed that Elsdon's skin had lightened abruptly, he made no mention of it. Instead he followed Elsdon into the cell, closed the door, and asked, "When you were at Parkside Prison, did you give any thought to what you would do if you were released?"

"Yes," said Elsdon, unable to break his gaze from the whip. "I knew I couldn't go home – my father wouldn't want me there. I wasn't sure what I'd do after that. I thought the best thing to do would be to find some way to stop myself from ever hurting anyone again."

"And have you found such a way?"

Elsdon shook his head. "It's just as well I'm to be eternally confined," he said in a low voice. "I couldn't be trusted to be free again. Not when I have this ugly darkness inside me, marring me." Then he remembered, too late, and he looked quickly at the High Seeker.

Mr. Smith seemed unoffended, though. His voice was as cool and level as usual as he said, "Well, then, to find a way to deal with that will be our first task, won't it? Because I can assure you, we do not permit the

eternally confined to idle away their days – they must put their minds to work at whatever task is at hand."

Hope leapt within Elsdon's body. "You mean you'll help me with this? Help me to destroy the darkness?"

"I cannot be certain that you'll be able to do so. —Hold this, please." He handed Elsdon the whip in a nonchalant manner, then moved his hands to his collar. "However, when a man is unjustly imprisoned, sometimes his only hope lies in imprisoning his prison-keeper. You may or may not be able to rid yourself of your darkness, but if you chain the darkness and make use of it, as it has made use of you, then the bond between the two of you will take on a very different character."

Elsdon said nothing; he was too busy staring as the High Seeker removed his shirt, neatly folded it, and tossed it onto the ground. Mr. Smith wore no undervest. His chest was smooth, and his skin there was dark, hiding any blemishes he might have had. As he turned his back, though, Elsdon saw faint scars, long faded.

The High Seeker, moving forward, placed his forearms against the wall and pressed his body forward. He looked over his shoulder and said, "I would like you to beat me on my back."

Elsdon dropped the whip; he had gone numb with the shock, except for his heart, which was pounding. He resisted an impulse to flee the cell.

Mr. Smith's gaze flicked toward the fallen whip, but all that he said was, "This is the test I have in mind, Mr. Taylor."

"I'd hurt you," Elsdon whispered.

"You cannot hurt me badly; it takes skill to wield a whip with any great power." Then, as Elsdon did not move: "Would it help if I told you I have been beaten before? It is a required part of the training of a Seeker, to undergo any torture he might inflict upon a prisoner."

Elsdon knelt slowly. As his hand touched the leather, he whispered, "If I should lose control again—"

"There are guards within call; they would respond quickly. Mr. Taylor, you ought to know that I would not permit any test that would bring serious harm to either of us."

"But why are you doing this?"

The High Seeker did not reply. Elsdon, rising, looked at the whip in his hand. He had held one before, when he was a young boy and had gone to his father's stables to talk with the servants there, in the years before he began to avoid the servants, lest they guess his secret. He remembered the carriage driver placing the whip in his hand and saying, "Try it; you'll enjoy it."

He had enjoyed it all too much. Thinking back on it, he thought he knew why. With his stomach clenching in a painful manner now, he asked, "How many lashes should I . . . ?"

"Twenty will be sufficient, I believe." The High Seeker's voice was passionless and without tension. "Begin now, please. One."

"Try it; you'll enjoy it," the carriage driver had said, and young Elsdon had pulled back his arm and swung the lash through the air, hitting a nearby post with the faintest of cracks.

The carriage driver had laughed and shown him how to change his grip. "Harder, lad," he said. "The post won't fight back. Give it all your strength."

He tried again, swinging the lash over and over against the pole. It was odd: he felt no pleasure from the act of swinging and hitting, but afterwards, when he drew the lash back, he felt as though a tightness within him had been uncoiled.

"'Tis the same with lovemaking," the carriage driver told him when Elsdon explained this. "You may be sleeping with the ugliest whore in town, but getting that hoarded energy out of you always helps."

Young Elsdon thought about that ugly whore, and about what it would be like to bring his whip down upon a horse. He found himself shivering in misery at that thought, and tried to remind himself that horses needed to be trained. A well-trained horse was a skilled horse, and he had seen for

himself the pride that some of the horses had in their work. If whipping the horses would help them to become better—

"Stop." The High Seeker's voice was hoarse. There was only darkness in the holes where his eyes should have been, and his chest was heaving.

Elsdon, feeling the shock and fear shoot through him, dropped the whip and hurried over to Mr. Smith's side, remembering at the last moment that the High Seeker was not permitted to touch him. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice high with anxiety.

"Give me a moment." Mr. Smith's voice was no longer cool and level; it was rasping and gasping. He had turned sideways and was leaning his shoulder against the wall, looking as though he would slide down to the floor at any moment. The movement hid his back from Elsdon, so that Elsdon was unable to see what damage he had done. Elsdon waited, his hands gripped tight together; he struggled to hold back the tears that were trying to squeeze through.

Finally the High Seeker opened his eyes and said, in a voice closer to normal, "You have more power in your arm than I'd thought."

"I harmed you." Elsdon could barely force the words past the tightness in his throat.

"You gave me twelve medium lashes; I'll be fully healed within the week. Will you hand me my shirt, please?"

Elsdon rushed to do so, saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Why apologize? You passed the test in an excellent manner." Then, as Elsdon stood dumb, Mr. Smith took the shirt and began to pull it on, slowly and stiffly. "You did precisely as I asked you to. You beat me on my back, nowhere else. You stopped the moment I gave the order, even though you had been led to expect that you would be permitted to give me eight further lashes. You could not have shown better control. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been with the ugliest whore in town and received release," Elsdon said slowly.

To his surprise, he heard Mr. Smith chuckle softly. "I'll try not to take that as an insult. May I assume that the whipping is the 'whore' for you, and that you received no pleasure from it?"

Elsdon nodded. "Not from the hurting. From the release. It's like with Sara."

Mr. Smith nodded. "I thought that might be the case." He bent down, grunting as he did so, and retrieved the whip from the floor, wrapping it neatly in a circle before attaching it to the hook on the left side of his belt.

Elsdon said slowly, "You're saying that, instead of working for my father, I should have taken up work that would have allowed me to release the violence in me in ways that would bring good to others – such as becoming a carriage driver."

"I think your skills could take you higher than that exalted position." Mr. Smith's voice cradled a hint of amusement. "However, the principle remains. Many a fine general got his start when he realized that, if he did not find a way to chain his darkness and make it serve him, he would end up in the Eternal Dungeon."

"And now I'm here." Elsdon's voice was dull; he was thinking of knowledge gained too late, and what he could have done with this knowledge if he had held it earlier.

"Now you're here," Mr. Smith agreed. "Which will simplify matters, should you wish to train to be a Seeker."

Elsdon stood motionless. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, in the voice of a healer making a tentative diagnosis, "You're mocking me."

"I do not make mock on such matters." And indeed, all shadows of amusement had vanished from the High Seeker's voice.

"But I thought— That is, Mr. Sobel said that few men qualify to be Seekers."

"Indeed. A Seeker must be willing to sacrifice fundamentals of life permitted to other men, such as marriage and children; he must have the ability to read beneath a person's words to discover the unstated truth

within; he must know in an instant if the prisoner is undergoing undue pain or is on the point of breaking; he must have the ability to go without sleep when a prisoner has need of him, to put aside passions when he is attacked, to resist the twin evils of remaining cold to the prisoner's dilemmas or of immersing himself so fully in the dilemmas that he cannot view objectively what the prisoner may have done. Many of these qualities are learned over time. However, you have begun to show that you possess the quality most necessary in a Seeker."

Elsdon felt his chest tighten. He said in a low voice, "You mean that I can torture prisoners."

"I mean that you place the needs of others over your own."

In the silence that followed, Elsdon's eyes scanned the cell. It had become all too familiar to him during his short time there. He knew the color of the mortar between each block in the translucent wall. He knew exactly how far to the ceiling the door rose and how far it swung out. He had memorized the screws that held the bed-shelf in place. He had looked at everything there was to see in this cell, and had conned it twenty times over. To be in a cell like this for another fifty years, or a cell even smaller . . .

"You say I place the needs of others over my own," he said to the waiting High Seeker. "The oath which the Record-keeper had me sign required that of me – that I place the best interests of the prisoner above my own. And the very first sentence of the *Code of Seeking* says that a Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners."

Mr. Smith nodded silently. He was in the stance he adopted when placing torture upon prisoners: relaxed, his eyes intent on the person before him.

Elsdon drew a deep breath and said, "If I accepted your offer to be a Seeker – if I let myself be freed rather than eternally confined within a cell – then I could never be sure whether I was doing this for the sake of the prisoners or for my own sake. So I can't do that. I can't."

His voice shook on the final words. Angry at himself for his weakness, he tried to stand straighter under the High Seeker's gaze.

Mr. Smith said nothing, but his eyes smiled.

Seeing this, Elsdon let his breath out, slowly this time. "That was the test. You were offering this temptation to see whether I would take it."

"My offer is a genuine one."

"But if I were a genuine Seeker, I wouldn't take it." Elsdon looked around the cell again. This time he remembered that the cell had one change from when he had been there before: its door was unlocked.

"Everything you've done since my judging . . ." Elsdon said. "Letting me walk back from the trial without guards, having me sign the oath of eternal commitment of my own will, placing me in an unlocked apartment overnight, offering to let me go free . . . It's all meant to make it easier for me, isn't it? When I walk into that locked cell, I'll know that I was offered alternatives, and I chose not to take them."

Still the High Seeker did not speak. Elsdon straightened his shoulders yet further and said quietly, "I'm ready now. You can take me to my new home."

Mr. Smith gestured toward the door. Elsdon left behind the cell with its bright, flickering flame.

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As Elsdon and Mr. Smith retraced their path along the corridor to the entry hall, they passed Mr. Sobel and Mr. Urman, who were escorting a hooded prisoner. Without a word, the High Seeker returned Mr. Urman's whip to the guard's hand. Mr. Urman took it without moving his eyes from the prisoner whose arm he grasped. Mr. Sobel, walking on the other side of the prisoner, gave Elsdon the briefest of smiles before returning his attention to the more important party.

Elsdon and the High Seeker walked back through the entry hall, which was empty now except for the Record-keeper, scribbling at his desk, and several pairs of guards, doing documentwork on the fringes of the room as they awaited new prisoners. Beyond them was the doorway to the corridor between the inner dungeon and the outer dungeon. Mr. Smith gestured

Elsdon through the door, for Elsdon was continuing to lead the way, as though he were a host and Mr. Smith the guest.

They did not walk all the way to the outer dungeon this time. Instead, Mr. Smith stopped at one of the doors along the corridor, which was featureless but for its latch and lock. The High Seeker pulled his chain of keys out, used the appropriate key, and pushed the door. It opened to darkness.

The High Seeker looked at Elsdon, waiting. Elsdon swallowed around the heartbeat fluttering in his throat and said, "Sir, I wanted to tell you . . . Please forget what I said yesterday about coming to visit me. I realize now that this was a selfish request – your time must be with the prisoners who are being searched, not wasted with a prisoner who has already been broken."

"This isn't the proper place to discuss such matters," the High Seeker replied, inclining his head toward some figures further down the corridor who were shovelling coal into the dungeon's furnace.

Elsdon looked again at the cell: it was utterly black, for even the faint light in the corridor did not penetrate beyond the first couple of steps. Pulling in a breath in the manner of a man who must swim deep and does not know when he will be able to breathe again, he walked into the cell.

He could hear behind him the soft chatter of the laborers tending the fires, and ahead of him, through the wall that faced the outer dungeon, he could hear the voices of people passing. He had a moment to think to himself that this was an unexpected bounty: he would be able to amuse himself by listening to the free inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon. Then the door closed behind him, and he was left in the dark.

For a moment, with a jerk of the heart, he thought this was part of the punishment. Then he heard the quiet step of the High Seeker as he walked forward. It took all of Elsdon's new-found courage to remain fixed in place. It was not simply the eeriness of being in a cell whose contents he could not see; it was being alone in the dark with a man like this. He forced himself to remember all that the High Seeker had done for him.

A minute later, Elsdon's heartbeat eased as he heard the scratch of a match against sandpaper. The lamp needed time to take light, but after a while, although the room was still grey with shadows, he could see about him. The first thing he noticed was a door, placed against the wall of the outer dungeon. This puzzled him, for he could not imagine why the guards who tended him would need to enter from that direction. Then he saw the remainder of the room.

A kitchen area lay to the right; though no stove stood in the room, nor any sink or pump, there were storage bins. Nearby was a living area with a cushioned bench facing a cushioned chair. The walls behind the bench held a series of sideboards surmounted with bookshelves, with a smattering of volumes lying upon the latter. . . .

He swirled round to face the High Seeker, the heart now beating hard at his throat. "No!" he cried. "I told you, I can't accept your offer to be a Seeker!"

"Do you still have your oath of eternal commitment?" Mr. Smith asked in an unruffled manner. He had raised the face-cloth of his hood, and his face was now naked to the younger man.

Elsdon thought for a second, then shook his head. "I'm sorry. I used it to mark my place in the copy of the *Code of Seeking* you showed me."

"I'll see that the book and the oath are sent to you. In the meantime . . ." The High Seeker pulled from the pocket of his shirt a piece of paper, its edges worn with use. "This is an older copy of the oath, so the phrasing has changed somewhat since it was signed. But it will remind you of what you swore."

He opened the paper and handed it to Elsdon. One of his fingers, covering the initial line, pointed to the lines immediately below. Elsdon looked down at the words written there: ". . . swear on this day that I will remain eternally confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions the High Torturer deems necessary."

His heartbeat stilled somewhat as the meaning of the words penetrated him. He looked over at the High Seeker, who said, "As you surmised, Mr. Taylor, we cannot spare our time with prisoners who have already been broken. We only offer eternal confinement to prisoners whom we believe

can be trusted to look after themselves, without need for more supervision than any other member of the Eternal Dungeon receives. There was never any question of placing guards or locks about you – not only would that be a waste of our resources, but it is unnecessary. You made it clear on the first day of your arrival in the dungeon that you have no need for such restraints."

This time Elsdon did not look at the door behind him, knowing what he would see. "Thank you," he said softly. "Thank you for trusting me. I'll stay within this – this cell—" He stumbled upon the word, finding it difficult to apply it to his pleasant surroundings. "And I'll do whatever work you require of me."

For he had remembered, in that moment, Mr. Smith's words about not permitting the eternally confined to idle away their days. All was clear now; he looked around the room, trying to sight whatever craft or chore the High Seeker wished him to do.

Mr. Smith said in a dry tone, "You might wish to take a second look at the paper you hold."

Elsdon read through the remainder of the oath, whose phrasing was not so very different from the phrasing of his own oath. Only when he reached the signature did his breath whistle in. He looked up to see that there was a suggestion of amusement around Mr. Smith's eyes. Elsdon said tentatively, "You're a prisoner here?"

"I am eternally confined, yes. But I did not arrive here as a prisoner. All men who choose to become Seekers must sign the oath of eternal commitment, for if we held so great a privilege above the other prisoners – to be able to leave here and return to the lighted world whenever we wished – then we would become so distanced from the prisoners being searched that we would not be able to understand their fears and their hopes. . . . Other dungeons in the world, greedy for the skills of their torturers, make prisoners of the torturers, but ours is the only dungeon in the world where the confinement is offered and freely accepted."

"So when I refused your offer that I should become a Seeker . . . When I chose to enter my cell rather than accept what I believed to be full freedom . . ."

"You qualified yourself in that moment to become a Seeker-in-Training. You showed that you place the needs of the prisoners over your own."

It was too much. Elsdon stared again at the small comforts of the room about him, and at the two doors through which he could step at any time, and he heard the noises of his fellow inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon, with whom he would be able to speak whenever he wished. He put his fists up against his mouth to suppress the sound there.

Beside him, Mr. Smith said quietly, "There is no need for you to rush a decision. You have undergone great pain – not only recently, but for most of your life. It will take a long time for you to heal from that; at the very least, you should rest for the next few weeks. It may become clearer to you during those weeks whether you should train as a Seeker or take some other job in the Eternal Dungeon. You would qualify for many positions here, and I've no doubt that most of the other dungeon inhabitants will be annoyed at me for trying to snatch a young man of such talents. So take your time to rest, and heal, and think."

Elsdon was still standing motionless in the center of his cell when he heard something tinkle onto the bookshelf beside him. It was the key to the cell. Elsdon turned to see the High Seeker walking toward the door to the inner dungeon.

"I must go," Mr. Smith said, looking back at him. "As you've seen, I have a new prisoner – I must work a little later today than I'd intended."

The sounds of morning bustling now seemed to Elsdon like a lullaby sung at day's end. It reminded him of how the previous day had ended, and of the words he had spoken then. As the High Seeker reached forward to touch the latch, Elsdon said abruptly, "Mr. Smith!"

The High Seeker had been reaching up to his hood. He stopped and looked back, eyebrows raised.

Elsdon walked forward to the door and said, his voice soft with hesitation, "You told me that a Seeker must have the ability to read beneath a person's words to discover the unstated truth within."

There was no change in Mr. Smith's expression. "That is a quality much valued in Seekers."

"You told me also that, when Seekers are in private with friends or neighbors, they're permitted to show their faces."

For a moment, the High Seeker's face remained unscribed, revealing nothing. Then the blankness broke, and something touched the edge of his mouth: the smile Elsdon had heard before, but not yet seen.

"I have no need for more neighbors," the High Seeker responded, waving his hand toward the wall adjoining the crowded corridor of the outer dungeon. "As you can see, I have too many already."

Even before the High Seeker finished his speech, Elsdon's own smile had broken through. "Good night, Layle," he said, his voice thick with shyness.

"Good night, Elsdon." The High Seeker touched him briefly on the arm. "I'll come by tomorrow after my shift, if I may."

Elsdon nodded, and the High Seeker's hand rose to touch his hood. Then the cloth covered the smile, and Layle Smith slipped into the inner dungeon.

With his departure, the cell grew quiet. Elsdon looked round at it, trying to decide whether to eat or read or sleep or explore the waiting wonders of the outer dungeon. Suddenly he flung his arms up, like a boy released from a hard schoolmaster. Emitting a cry of joy, he twirled about in the room for a bit before collapsing, laughing, onto the armchair.

Then his smile faded. Very softly, at the edge of his hearing, he could hear someone crying. The sobbing was hard, and it came from the direction of the inner dungeon.

He thought for a long while about this sound before he got up and walked through the door to the outer dungeon, in search of the guest apartment he had left behind, so that he could fetch the black-bound book lying there.

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. . . The first of the Eternal Dungeon's High Seekers was also its most famous, not only for his own actions, but for the manner in which Layle Smith influenced the men and women around him.

Time has destroyed many valuable records from the Eternal Dungeon. To our good fortune, however, a historian living three generations after Layle Smith, working from documents now lost, compiled a set of statistics concerning the "success" rate of the Eternal Dungeon's High Torturers and High Seekers.

It comes as no surprise to learn that Layle Smith headed this list, with a ninety-seven percent success rate in breaking prisoners. Of the prisoners he broke, eight-three percent were later sentenced to execution by the "magistrates" (judges).

These statistics are often cited to demonstrate the barbarity of Layle Smith. That the first High Seeker often used barbarous methods to break his prisoners no one today could deny. Yet the statistics hold a different meaning for anyone well acquainted with the history of the Eternal Dungeon.

Unlike institutions today where arrested men and women are questioned, the Eternal Dungeon was not sent prisoners whose guilt was thought to be open to question. Instead, the lesser prisons of Yclau sent prisoners whose guilt had already been determined as certain, so that the Eternal Dungeon could extract the confession needed to learn whether other parties had assisted in the crimes. Under the circumstances, what is surprising is not the high number of executions of dungeon prisoners, but rather the fact that the Seekers made any effort at all to discover whether the prisoners were innocent.

Moreover, a final statistic, usually not cited, offers us another perspective on Layle Smith. The same historian who compiled the statistics about the first High Seeker notes, in an off-hand manner, that eight percent of the prisoners who were sentenced to death because of testimony that Layle Smith obtained were offered eternal confinement within the Eternal Dungeon.

Eight percent may seem like a small proportion. But if we keep in mind how many prisoners Layle Smith searched yearly, and how long he

retained the title of High Seeker, we begin to understand the reason for the many complaints, during this period, of overcrowding within the Eternal Dungeon. The Eternal Dungeon was a ship of refugees, packed from bow to stern with hundreds of men and women whom Layle Smith had rescued from death.

This is the image that Layle Smith must have held amongst his contemporaries, and the image should not be forgotten, even as we acknowledge that the darkness we recognize in him today was first noted by those who worked alongside him. "Light and darkness cannot exist in a single place," some historians say, but the history of the Eternal Dungeon, and of its first High Seeker, suggests otherwise.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***Rebirth* 2**
LOVE AND BETRAYAL

The year 355, the seventh month.

Much valuable information concerning the Eternal Dungeon has been lost over the centuries. To provide a telling example of this loss, the most important figure in the history of the Eternal Dungeon was its first High Seeker, Layle Smith; yet we know nothing about his appearance, his hobbies, or his loves.

The information about him that does exist confirms his importance in the history of psychology. He is without question the author of the fifth revision of the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking*, which contained the rules by which the dungeon's Seekers questioned criminals placed in their custody. Any casual reader of the fifth revision will recognize entire passages from the book, for this volume provided the basis for the later *Code of Psychology*, which to this day remains the most important work in its field.

All of this suggests that Layle Smith was a man of formidable skill. Frustratingly, however, we have lost most of the examples of his

techniques of "searching." What examples we possess are just as often records of his failures . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

"He was a sadist," said Elsdon Taylor. "That's the only word I can use to describe him."

Layle Smith made no immediate reply to the words of the young man sitting before him. The two men were in an apartment, spacious by the standards of the Eternal Dungeon, which meant that the living quarters were smaller than many of the dungeon's breaking cells. Crammed into this tiny area was a kitchen and sitting room, the latter with bookcases on all three of its walls. The only gap in the reading matter came at the point where three doors led to the outer dungeon, inner dungeon, and bedroom.

Reaching over for a pitcher on the table he was standing beside, the High Seeker asked, "Do you use the word 'sadist' in its restricted sense?"

"You mean, do I think my father derived sexual pleasure from beating me?" Elsdon, curled up within a soft-cushioned chair, gave a weary shrug. "I couldn't say. I suppose it wouldn't surprise me if he had. He was that sort of man – cruel beyond words, and always convincing himself that his cruelty was a form of love."

Layle paused to wipe up a spill. Without looking Elsdon's way, he said, "If your father had found someone with whom he could direct his violent impulses in a manner that brought happiness to the other person, would that have made a difference to you?"

Elsdon gave a sharp laugh as he reached out to take the cup Layle offered him. "Do you mean, would I think more kindly toward him if he'd only beaten masochists? No, to tell the truth, I'd have despised him more if he'd corrupted anyone into enjoying his sickening pleasure. . . . Ow! Are you trying to torture me?"

Layle smiled then, saying, "I'm off duty. It helps if you don't try to poke that in your eye."

"It helps if you give me a cup I can actually drink out of." Elsdon eyed with suspicion the hollow reed attached to the inside of the cup. "What's the purpose of this, Layle? Aside from blinding your guests, I mean."

"Try closing your hood, and you'll see."

Elsdon reached up and fumbled for a moment with the hood on his head. It had taken him some time to grow used to the feel of the black cloth and to be able to locate with ease the edge of the flap that must cover the face when a Seeker was in public. Now he found the flap that lay atop his head and pulled it down, feeling the tingle of half suffocation that always occurred when the hood hung over his nose and mouth. Only his eyes were free of the cloth: he looked over to see that Layle was smiling again. "Now try to drink," the High Seeker suggested.

Elsdon lifted the cup . . . and immediately lowered it. "Oh," he said, scrutinizing the cup thoughtfully. He carefully turned the cup so that the reed was next to his face and slipped the reed under his hood. It took him a second to adjust to the feel of the reed in his mouth; then he tentatively sucked at the liquid.

"Very clever," he said finally, pulling up his face-cloth. "I trust I won't have to drink this way *too* often?"

Layle chuckled. "It's helpful when you're in public parts of the outer dungeon, but when you're at home or visiting friends . . . No, it's possible to relax then." He handed Elsdon a second cup, this one without the reed.

Elsdon raised the cup to his lips . . . and sighed as a knock sounded upon the door leading to the inner dungeon. Layle chuckled again, reaching up to lower his face-cloth. "Excuse me," he said.

Following the High Seeker's example, Elsdon flipped down the front of his hood before standing to wander over to the bookcase. He examined the titles there: *Racks, A Manual for Woodworkers; Pain and Punishment in Our Queendom's Prisons; Spikes and Their Usage; One Hundred Techniques for Breaking a Prisoner; Man's Cruelty to Man* . . . After a while Elsdon winced. Pulling down the volume on cruelty, he began to leaf through it.

Behind him, a voice said without preliminary, "Mr. Chapman wants a reply to this message."

There was a short pause, and then the High Seeker replied, "Tell him to proceed for now. I'll discuss the matter with him tomorrow evening. . . . Was there anything else you wanted?"

Elsdon turned in time to see the messenger – who was a guard about Elsdon's own age – shift from one foot to the other. "Well, Mr. Smith, it's about my schedule of duties."

"Yes?" Layle's voice gave no encouragement to the speaker.

"I'm scheduled to work the day shift, but every other day, it seems, I'm being asked to work evenings! It's just not fair – my private life is suffering because of it."

Layle said, with no emotion to his voice, "If you believe that your rights as a guard have been violated in any manner, you should take your concern to the Codifier."

"It's not a question of rights, Mr. Smith, it's a matter of justice. You see, I have a friend in the outer dungeon, and I'm always having to break off arrangements I've made to meet—"

"Mr. Gerson." Layle's voice was now cold. "If this is not a matter of Code-breaking, then I suggest that we discuss it when I am on duty. In the meantime, you might consider whether you have joined the right profession. People in our work will always be called upon to sacrifice portions of their private life for the sake of their duty."

There was a silence; the guard's face appeared set in stone. After a moment Mr. Gerson said stiffly, "I'll speak with you later about this, then. Oh, hello, Taylor!" For the first time, the guard took note of the second inhabitant of the room.

"Mr. Gerson." Layle's voice had turned as glacial as popular rumor held the Eternal Dungeon to be. "If a Seeker indicates to you that he is willing to be addressed informally by you during your leisure hours, that is a private matter. But whilst you are on duty, you will treat all of the inner dungeon inhabitants – Seekers, guards, and prisoners – with the formality that your work demands."

Mr. Gerson's face returned to stone. "Yes, sir. Good night."

"Good night." Layle turned, letting the door swing shut behind him. Before the door closed, Elsdon received the privilege of seeing a guard thumb his

nose at the High Seeker. Mr. Gerson grinned at him, and Elsdon bit his lip to keep from laughing. Then the door shut with a soft thump.

"A typical quiet evening," remarked Layle, pulling up his hood flap as he returned to Elsdon's side.

"You're *never* off duty, are you?" Elsdon said as he raised his own face-cloth.

"Only in my dreamings. What's that you're looking at?"

Holding up the book so that Layle could see the title, Elsdon read aloud, "'In those cruel days of yesteryear, the men who ran the dungeon of our land were so filled with sadistic brutality that it is said that no female prisoner emerged from the dungeon with her virtue intact, and no youth remained unmolested. . . .' How can you bear to read such depressing books?"

"Among other things, they provide cautionary tales." Layle's gaze was running across the bookshelves. "I learn from these books what tragedies can be committed by Seekers if they do not show proper restraint. After all, we all enjoy our work in some fashion, or we would not choose to become Seekers." His gaze rested upon Elsdon.

Elsdon shut the book and returned it to the shelf before saying, "You mean I'm like my father."

"We established at the time of your imprisonment that you were not. I would not have allowed you to take the hood of a Seeker-in-Training if I thought you would again use your impulses toward violence for evil."

Elsdon shook his head. "That's not all that distinguishes me from my father. My father *enjoyed* my pain – whether or not he received a sexual thrill from it, he certainly obtained some kind of pleasure from it. I don't enjoy seeing prisoners in pain. Yes, I have a desire for violence, but the actual act of hurting another person sickens me. Murdering Sara . . . I still haven't been able to stop myself from vomiting when I think of what I did. I agreed to become a Seeker because I believe you're right that if I find an acceptable outlet for my violent desires –ordering punishments only when it would be in the best interests of the prisoner to receive pain – that will

stop me from losing control of myself again. But I'll *never* enjoy other people's sufferings. You mustn't think I'm a monster like that."

After the silence had lengthened to the point of snapping like a racked man's sinews, Elsdon said, "Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I do." Layle's voice was matter-of-fact. "And I'm grateful to you for sharing your views on this matter. . . . We've spoken enough on this topic, I think. Have a seat."

Elsdon obeyed his gesture. Layle leaned back against the bookcase, letting his arm rest along one of the shelves holding the darkly titled volumes. "Now, then, you've met most of the guards and Seekers by now. It's not often that you'll work alongside another Seeker, except during your training period, so it's most important that you maintain good relations with the guards. I've found that formal relations work best."

Elsdon frowned as he picked at a stray thread in the chair. "Are you criticizing my friendship with Garrett?"

"Not at all; I'm delighted that Mr. Gerson has found a steady-minded companion. I just feel I ought to remind you about the Code's ruling on the matter of Seekers taking love-mates."

Elsdon's frown deepened; he pushed himself forward to the edge of the seat. "Look," he said, "there's nothing like that between Garrett and me – in fact, he already has a love-mate. But if there were . . . I can understand the rule forbidding Seekers from marrying, since their children would need to be raised in the Dungeon, but I don't understand the rule forbidding love-bonds, especially between Seekers and guards."

"There's a simple reason for that rule: Seekers take a lifelong oath to remain in the dungeon. Guards do not. Our experience over the decades has taught us that allowing love-bonds between oath-yoked men and non-oath-yoked men or women creates too great a strain in the dungeon. Too many guards and outer dungeon inhabitants have chosen to remain in the Eternal Dungeon long after they should have left, and too many Seekers have sought to be released from their oaths. I trust you do remember," Layle added lightly, "that the Code permits Seekers to become love-mates to each other."

For a moment, Elsdon could not speak. His heart was pounding so hard that he was convinced that he must be blushing from hairtip to toenail. Finally he said, "Yes, I remember. Are there any rules governing that?"

He tried to keep his voice cool and professional. He could not tell from Layle's expression whether he succeeded. The High Seeker said only, "You will be expected to notify the Codifier if you enter into a love-bond with another Seeker, however brief; the Codifier needs to be aware of such facts when judging disciplinary matters. Other than that, there are no regulations that affect you presently. Some of the senior Seekers, who have supervisory duties over junior Seekers and Seekers-in-Training, prefer not to enter into bonds with Seekers who work under them. This custom has not yet been Codified, but it is one that I recommend."

Elsdon stared at him. "But that means that you—"

He stopped himself at the edge of the cliff and drew back hastily, saying, "I mean, what about the Codifier? He supervises all of the Seekers in the dungeon. Does that mean he's not permitted to take a love-mate here?"

Layle ran a finger across the edge of the bookshelf, inspected the dust upon his fingertip, and said, "As it happens, the Codifier was married and widowed before coming to the Eternal Dungeon. He wishes to remain unmated, out of honor to his dead wife."

"Oh, I see. And do you—?"

The remaining words died within Elsdon's mouth as he caught sight of Layle's face. The High Seeker gestured to Elsdon to stand, saying, "We've spoken enough tonight, I think. We can continue our discussion next time."

"But I wanted to ask you—"

"Next time will be the best time for questions." Layle's voice was cool. He turned his back upon Elsdon and began shifting the books upon the shelf.

Elsdon stared at him, but the High Seeker did not turn. After a moment, Elsdon said awkwardly, "Well . . . I'll come again tomorrow . . . That is, if I may, sir."

The High Seeker said nothing, and Elsdon, feeling himself grow chill, reached up and pulled down the flap that hid his face on formal occasions. He turned toward the door.

His hand was upon the latch when he felt a touch on the sleeve; he looked to see Layle standing behind him, naked-faced. In his outstretched palm lay a key.

"For you," the High Seeker said. "In case I should be away from my cell when you call next. Feel free to await me here."

He placed the key into Elsdon's hand and then, without another word, returned to the bookshelf and began browsing through the volumes there.

o—o—o

"He's like that," said Elsdon Taylor. "One moment he'll be treating me as though he hates me, and the next he'll be giving me the key to his quarters. He's as changeable as a winter wind. I suppose that's what makes him so good with the prisoners – they can't predict how he'll act. I'm looking forward to seeing him at work—"

"You're in love with him, aren't you?" Garrett Gerson said.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the Seeker-in-Training blush bright red. Rarely could he catch Taylor out like this; on most occasions, the young man seemed as imperturbable as an ancient magistrate. Garrett, three years older than Elsdon Taylor, considered him a challenge.

Taylor swallowed heavily and said in a soft voice, "Is it so obvious?"

"'Mr. Smith thinks that racks are overrated as instruments of breaking.' 'Mr. Smith thinks that every Seeker should hold the Code in memory.' 'Mr. Smith thinks that I should part my hair on the right.' Yes, it's obvious."

Taylor smiled at Garrett's mocking rendition of his voice, but he furrowed his brow as he said, "I hope that the High Seeker hasn't guessed."

Garrett gave the other young man the expression he reserved for when Taylor was being particularly obtuse. Taylor sighed and added, "Oh, I suppose he must have. It's hideously embarrassing. 'High Seeker rescues young man from certain death, and the young man promptly falls in love

with the High Seeker' – it must have happened to him a million times. He's being very polite in not mentioning it."

Garrett took a longer look at the Seeker-in-Training before him. The other youth was not far away – he could not be, in the cramped quarters that were allotted to guards. Garrett had been to Taylor's "cell," as the Seekers' private quarters were called because all Seekers took an oath to remain eternally confined within the dungeon. Taylor's so-named cell was twice the size of Garrett's quarters, even though Taylor was newly arrived and Garrett had worked at the dungeon for two years. It was yet another example of the lack of fairness he faced in his daily life.

Such injustices usually caused him to pick his words carefully when around Seekers, but now genuine curiosity caused him to ask, "What do you see in the man?"

"In the High Seeker?" Taylor stared at him with the same astonishment that a dog might show if asked to explain why he brought bones to his master. Garrett was hard pressed not to laugh, but he remained bland in expression, and after a moment Taylor said, "Sweet blood, Garrett, what's *not* to admire in Layle Smith?"

It irritated Garrett how Taylor insisted upon using his first name, as though they were still boys in school. It annoyed him almost as much as the High Seeker's obsession with having everyone address one another by formal titles. "I'm not sure he's so pure as all that," Garrett said, trying to figure out a gentle way to bring sense into Taylor's naive worldview. "I've heard stories about Smith from some of the other guards—"

"Mr. Smith doesn't approve of listening to gossip," Taylor said stiffly.

Garrett could guess the reasons why Layle Smith would disapprove of gossip, but he cursed himself inwardly. It was so hard keeping within the good graces of Taylor, and sometimes he asked himself why he made the effort. It wasn't as though Taylor cared about Garrett's misfortunes.

Well, Garrett thought, let the boy learn the truth through hard trial. He backtracked rapidly, saying, "I suppose you're right. So what do you admire most about the High Seeker?"

"The Code, of course," Taylor answered promptly.

Garrett, who had spent many a night contemplating how he could destroy every copy of the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking*, struggled to keep from grimacing. "He didn't invent the Code, you know," he pointed out. "It's as old as the Eternal Dungeon."

"Yes, but he wrote the present revision of it. Even the parts that aren't directly his are his in the sense that he decided to keep them from the previous versions. At the beginning of the Code, for example . . . Where's your copy?"

Garrett sighed, stood up, and went over to the end of his quarters that served as a bedroom, though a curtain was the only indicator of where the bedroom began and the sitting room ended. After rummaging for several minutes, he found the slim black volume underneath a pile of unwashed clothes.

He could tell from the tightness of Taylor's lips that the other youth did not approve of Garrett's handling of the *Code of Seeking*. But the Seeker-in-Training simply took the volume into his hand and opened it to the first page of text.

"'A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners,'" he read aloud. "That's from the first version of the Code – it's also in the oath Seekers take. But the next sentence is Mr. Smith's . . ."

He rambled on. Garrett paid no attention to what he said, focussing his thoughts on Taylor's finely curved cheekbones, his rich white skin, and the glossy hair peeking out from his hood. Boys and men had never appealed to Garrett in that way, but he found it amusing that Taylor was utterly unaware of how much power he held over most of the men and women around him, simply by virtue of his looks.

Which led Garrett's thoughts back to the High Seeker. Taylor was saying, "I counted them once. There are two hundred and seventeen of them – two hundred and seventeen rules preventing Seekers from misusing their power over prisoners. Most of the rules didn't appear in the previous versions of the Code – they were Layle Smith's contribution. How could I *not* admire a man like that?"

"So why don't you let him bed you?" Garrett asked mildly.

He had the deep pleasure of watching Taylor blush for the second time that evening. "Don't mock me," the Seeker-in-Training muttered.

"Mock you?" Garrett tried to make himself sound as though such an idea would never occur to him. He was brought back to the ground by the sharp look that Taylor gave him. It was easy to forget, amidst all of Taylor's innocence, that Taylor was a Seeker-in-Training and had obtained that title for good reason. Though Taylor was still new to his role, he was not a simpleton; he could not be fooled in all respects.

Garrett shrugged and said, in the voice he used when he needed to placate his own Seeker, "I didn't think you'd take my words as mockery. Why shouldn't you go to bed with the High Seeker?"

"Oh, bloody blades, Garrett." Taylor's voice held an uncommon note of exasperation. "We're talking about the *High Seeker*."

"You don't like being bedded by men?" Garrett was finding this art of teasing Taylor through innocent questions to be the most diverting game he had ever played.

Taylor stared at him blankly.

"Vovimian men don't let themselves be bedded by other men." Garrett enjoyed the rare occasions on which he was able to teach Taylor something he didn't already know. "A Vovimian man would only bed another man if he was raping him."

"Vovimians also beat their children."

Anger roughening Taylor's voice caused Garrett to stiffen, as he might have done if a stick in his hand had suddenly turned into a poisonous snake. Taylor caught the movement and gave a half-smile. "Sorry," he said. "I just meant that I don't take barbarians as my standard of behavior. No, of course I don't mind the idea of going to bed with another man. But we're talking about Layle Smith. The High Seeker. The man who is a legend among prison workers. And I'm just a Seeker-in-Training, with no experience at anything but murder."

His voice was matter-of-fact as he spoke. Garrett felt the temptation he often did, to begin probing Taylor about his kin-murder so that he could see what blood and guts spilled out of the Seeker-in-Training. But he suppressed the desire, saying, "Perhaps that's what he wants."

Taylor stared at him blankly again.

Garrett sighed and leaned forward, gracing Taylor with his worldly-wise expression. "Some men like that," he explained carefully. "They like going to bed with someone less experienced than themselves, someone who's younger. They go cock-high at the idea of bedding a virgin."

To his disappointment, Taylor didn't blush again. Garrett considered whether to explain to Taylor how he had come by this information, but decided that it was no business of Taylor's. Besides, for all Garrett knew, the Queen's Secretary might have recommended him for work at the Eternal Dungeon in any case.

He could see Taylor musing upon this new thought, and he pressed his advantage, saying, "I'll wager that, if you asked him to go to bed with you, he would."

"Wager?" Taylor asked absentmindedly, obviously trying to put his tongue around an unfamiliar word.

In an instant, all of the advantage Garrett had gained during this meeting was swept away. A single word could do that.

He cursed himself inwardly, by all the curses he knew that Taylor had never heard. Bad enough that Garrett should have the disadvantage of his background, but why did his speech have to betray his origins at the worst possible moments? He tried to imagine this soft-bred Seeker-in-Training standing in a common-folks' betting room, watching his father wager away all his earnings, leaving his son to struggle his way out of poverty . . .

No, Taylor would never understand what ordinary folk went through. Let him worry his head over trivialities such as whether the High Seeker would be interested in him. Garrett could have told him the answer in an instant, but he wasn't about to impart information to a Seeker.

Not without payment.

CHAPTER TWO

"Now," said the High Seeker, "you had a question for me at the end of our last meeting."

They were standing in Layle's sitting room. Elsdon had awaited Layle for a half hour outside his cell, not yet having the courage to try his key. Though the doors leading to the inner and outer dungeon were closed now, the High Seeker had not raised his hood, and his head was turned away.

Upon their first meeting, Elsdon had thought this a manner in which Seekers distanced themselves from their prisoners. He had since come to realize that the head-turning was a gesture of withdrawal that Layle was prone to use at intervals, like a man stepping back from danger.

"Yes," said Elsdon. "You told me the Codifier must be notified if I took a love-mate. I was wondering whether you needed to be notified as well."

For a moment, the High Seeker did not speak or move; then he turned his head and threw back his face-cloth. A faint smile touched his lips.

"What is it?" Elsdon asked uneasily.

"Nothing," Layle replied, gesturing him into a seat. "That simply wasn't the question I expected you to ask. The answer is no, there is no need for you to inform me." His voice turned dry. "Once you have learned how efficient the gossip circuit is in this dungeon, you'll understand how unlikely it is that you'll need to inform anyone of your love-bonds. . . . Well, then, we were discussing the inhabitants of the inner dungeon."

He paused to allow Elsdon time to slip into his usual seat. The chair fit the shape of Elsdon's body precisely; no one had sat upon the cushions since his last arrival. He curled up in a relaxed manner, marvelling again at the efficient engineering that allowed a wet underground cavern to be transformed into a dry warren of homey rooms. It was hard sometimes for Elsdon to remember that this was his prison.

Layle waited till he was well settled before saying, "You'll be spending a fair amount of time with the Record-keeper. Aside from assigning Seekers to prisoners, Mr. Aaron's unenviable job is to archive the records of every inhabitant of the Eternal Dungeon. Those documents date back from the

time the dungeon began keeping records five generations ago. All of the records Mr. Aaron keeps are open, though certain sealed documents are maintained by the Codifier. I'd encourage you to browse through the open records of the inner dungeon's permanent residents when you have leisure. We've found that allowing inner dungeon inhabitants to know one another's pasts cuts down on the amount of unpleasant gossip that takes place."

Elsdon nodded. "And the sealed records?"

"May only be viewed at the discretion of the Codifier or with written permission from the person whose record it is. You may occasionally find the need to examine sealed portions of past prisoners' records. Don't feel afraid to apply to the Codifier in such cases."

Elsdon gave a half-hearted laugh. "If I can get up the courage to enter his domain."

Layle smiled as he reached over to pick up a cup of water that had been awaiting him. "Mr. Daniels is somewhat formidable in his formality, I'll agree. However, keep in mind that he holds the most important title in this dungeon – far more important than my own. If you ever have a question as to whether the Code has been broken, whether by yourself or by any other person, you must take your concern directly to him. He has the authority to overrule the commands of everyone in this dungeon, including myself, and he has similar power to discipline anyone."

"A dangerous power," observed Elsdon quietly.

"He must answer to the Queen and the magistrates for his actions, but he provides a welcome oversight on the Seekers. He, more than any other man, protects the rights of the prisoners."

"The prisoners." Elsdon voice grew hushed as he settled further back in his seat. "You haven't mentioned them yet."

"That's because it will be some time before you're permitted contact with them."

"Because I might identify with them?" With his fingers gripping the armchair tighter, Elsdon tried to smile.

"Partly." Layle set down his cup carefully. "Not many prisoners survive the Eternal Dungeon, Elsdon, and those who do survive it require time for their healing. You know how close you came to joining the other prisoners in being placed under execution; that wound is still fresh for you. This is a delicate period for you – far more delicate than I think you realize. But even if that were not the case, you would need time to be trained before being allowed to stand in the same room as a prisoner. You will need to be taught the rules of conduct toward prisoners, the methods of searching, the techniques of inducing pain where necessary—"

"The experiencing of that pain." Elsdon's voice remained low.

Layle lifted his eyebrows. "So you've heard about that."

"You told me yourself, when you had me whip you to test my response. You said that all Seekers are required to undergo whatever the prisoners undergo."

Layle nodded. "The punishment you underwent as a prisoner will count toward that experience, you will be glad to hear. As for the rest . . . I don't want to discount how difficult it will be, but it will not be as hard as you imagine. The worst that a prisoner must undergo is fear, a fear we deliberately cultivate in many cases, since it permits us to keep the physical pain at as low a level as possible. A prisoner receiving, say, sixty hard lashes will not know, as you will, that he will emerge from the experience alive and in a condition capable of being healed."

"And the rack?" Elsdon's voice was tight.

"Will be most difficult of all. But you will not need to spend more than an hour there."

Elsdon lowered his brow in puzzlement. "Why? You told me that most prisoners spend three to five days on the rack – some up to seven days."

"Because," Layle said, his voice turning light once more, "if you were a prisoner, and any Seeker placed you on the rack, it would take them less than an hour to break you."

The room was still; with the door closed, only the faintest sound could be heard of people walking through the corridors of the outer dungeon. It was

daytime, and the laborers who kept the Eternal Dungeon alive were busy at their work.

Elsdon said, "It must be frightening to have the power to know something like that."

Layle's lips bent in a smile, though his eyes remained sober. "As you'll realize, when you reach that level of skill. Which brings me to the most important inhabitant of the Eternal Dungeon."

With a flick of his wrist, he pulled a book from the shelf and tossed it to Elsdon. Elsdon caught it with the quick reflexes that, he had already realized, helped to qualify him for his work; then he stared down at the black cover. "The Code," he breathed.

Layle nodded. "I know that you read the *Code of Seeking* before you were hooded. But now you will eat with it, sleep with it, and above all, work with it. It must become as familiar to you as the refrain of a nursery lullaby. You should never have to ask yourself, 'What shall I do in a situation like this?' The answer should be obvious to you, from your knowledge of the Code."

Elsdon opened the book at random. The words spun before his eyes: "'. . . A guard may touch the prisoner only under the circumstances outlined above. A Seeker may never touch the prisoner, unless to save a life that is in immediate danger, or unless he has received prior written permission from the Codifier. Penalties for violation of this rule . . .'"

He looked up from the book. "I wondered when I was a prisoner why you never touched me, not even when I was crying. I thought you didn't care about my pain."

"We must sometimes appear cold to the prisoner," Layle said, still standing against the bookcase. "We have found that violation of this particular rule leads to the worst abuses – perhaps especially when the Seeker has feelings of warmth toward the prisoner. . . . Which reminds me. I trust that you have read the section of the Code concerning rape?"

Startled at the change of topic, Elsdon stumbled through his reply. "Well, I've skimmed it. I didn't think it necessary to read it word by word. I mean,

I'm not likely to pin a prisoner to the wall and begin pounding myself into him—"

"Read it." The High Seeker's voice was never stern; when he was disappointed with Elsdon, his voice instead grew so chill as to cause shivers to ripple across Elsdon's skin. "You need to understand that the Code regards rape—"

A soft knock came upon the door leading to the outer dungeon. Layle's face twisted with annoyance, an expression quickly hidden as the High Seeker flipped down the flap of his hood.

Elsdon was still fumbling with his face-cloth as the door opened; he turned his back quickly. Behind him, a familiar voice said, "I hope you'll forgive me for interrupting, sir. Mr. Chapman asked that this message be delivered."

"Thank you." Paper rustled, and Elsdon turned to see that the High Seeker was examining a note in his hands. Layle said, without looking up, "How comes it that you are delivering notes for other guards' Seekers during your off-duty hours, Mr. Sobel?"

The High Seeker's senior night guard gave a quick smile. "I was passing this way. Another guard was going off duty, and he asked me to deliver the note, because he was in a hurry."

"That other guard would be Mr. Gerson." Layle's voice was flat, requiring no answer, and Mr. Sobel gave him none. After a moment, Layle looked up from the note and said, "I'll speak to Mr. Chapman about this myself, when I see him next. . . . I understand that you've asked the Codifier for a leave of duties."

"Only for a day, sir," Mr. Sobel replied. "My day off is coming at the end of this fortnight, and I was wondering whether it could be doubled. If you aren't busy with a difficult prisoner, that is."

"Hmm." Layle seemed to consider this as he turned aside to rummage amongst some papers lying upon a table next to the door. The muscles in Mr. Sobel's neck suddenly stood out, but he said nothing.

Layle found the piece of paper he was looking for and handed it to Mr. Sobel, who glanced at it, then turned startled eyes toward the High Seeker.

"A gift from the Codifier and myself," said Layle in a matter-of-fact manner. "You've worked in the Eternal Dungeon for twenty-two years; we decided it was time that you had a month off. May I express the selfish hope that you'll be continuing your work at this dungeon?"

Mr. Sobel gave a long sigh and slipped the paper into the inner pocket of his jacket. "Yes, Mr. Smith. My fiancée has already applied for work in the outer dungeon, and I believe that she has a good chance of being accepted. Sir, it is most gracious of you—"

"I'll speak to the Codifier about your rooming situation." Layle spoke as though he had not heard his guard's final words. "And if you should have the wish to raise children within the dungeon, speak to me about that; I think that we would be able to accommodate you. We can't afford to lose you." His voice was cool, as though he were discussing shift changes.

"I'll do that, sir." Mr. Sobel made no effort to renew his thanks. Elsdon guessed, from having witnessed exchanges like this before, that the guard knew how unlikely it was that the High Seeker would allow the emotional level of the conversation to rise high enough to permit such warmth. Instead, the guard looked over at Elsdon and said, "Good evening, Mr. Taylor. I trust you are well?"

Elsdon smiled, then remembered that the guard could not see his smile, and offered his greetings and congratulations.

When the door had closed again and both Seekers' face-cloths were raised, Elsdon said, "I didn't know that Mr. Sobel was to be wed – how did you learn of this?"

Layle raised an eyebrow. "With the gossip circuit in this dungeon as lively as it is? My surprise is that you didn't know already. I was under the impression that you and Mr. Sobel were on the way to establishing a friendship at the time of your imprisonment."

"Oh." Elsdon stared a moment at his boots, which he carefully polished each morning to present a professional appearance, though few dungeon

residents had seen him as yet. "Yes, I suppose I should get to know Mr. Sobel better. It's just that I've been spending a lot of time with Garrett . . ."

Layle was wearing an expression that even a fellow Seeker could not read. "I do not want to interfere in your privacy, Elsdon," he said in a colorless voice, "but I do believe that confining oneself to a single friend is not wise —"

"Did you reach this conclusion after befriending me?"

For a moment, Layle was still. Then he gave a deep chuckle, which for him was the equivalent of a shout of laughter. Elsdon grinned at him.

"You're right," Layle said in an easy voice. "I'm not the proper person to be delivering lectures about restricted social lives. What lecture was I giving before we were interrupted?"

"I can't remember."

Layle sighed. "Let's flee this cell," he said. "If we remain here, we're likely to be interrupted again, and perhaps the walk to our destination will refresh my mind." He gave a small frown, as though trying to ascertain something important, and then his hood hid his face.

o—o—o

Thousands of black-winged beasts dove toward Elsdon. He stood motionless as they curved their path around him, like water around a stream-rock. Above him, atop the passage leading to the lighted world, someone shouted, and Elsdon heard a creak as the great gates above were opened to allow the beasts their nightly exit. It was a tradition, he knew, that was far older than the Eternal Dungeon – as old as the dungeon that had preceded the Eternal Dungeon, that primitive, barbaric place where prisoners had found no friends or allies, only endless, unjust pain.

Those days were over, but the bat ritual remained. Elsdon watched with awe as the creatures who lived in the heights of the cavern housing the Eternal Dungeon streaked out into the lighted world. For a moment Elsdon caught a glimpse of the palace corridor that led, eventually, to the world he had forever left behind, and he felt a hard pain in his chest. Then he turned

deliberately away, in time to see that the High Seeker was also watching the bats.

He remembered then that, while his own imprisonment had been but three months long, the High Seeker had taken his oath of eternal commitment while still in his youth. This remembrance provided Elsdon with the measure of proportion he needed. His momentary twinge of self-pity was replaced by compassion for the man whose choices in life had been far greater than Elsdon's, and who had picked the narrow path.

And with that compassion came the other emotion he strove so hard to hide. He tried to school his face, knowing how much the High Seeker could read from Elsdon's eyes alone. In private, such a disclosure would have been horrendous enough, but here in public it was unthinkable.

Indeed, the High Seeker was now holding himself in the formal pose he reserved for his on-duty moments. The bats, not the dungeon water-clocks, were the signal for the arrival of the night shift, and though Layle's prisoner would have to wait a few hours more for the High Seeker's arrival in his breaking cell, the High Seeker was now as much on duty as though he were standing in that cell.

Elsdon looked around at the entry hall, whose main inhabitants, the guards, sat at tables on the edges of the room, chatting and doing documentwork. He was surprised that the High Seeker had brought him here; this was his first visit to the inner dungeon since the day he had been offered the opportunity to train as a Seeker. Since that time, all of his excursions had been to the outer dungeon or to the corridor where the Seekers' cells lay, and then only when in the company of Layle or Garrett, for he still felt shy appearing before others in the uniform that, not so long ago, he had looked upon with terror. When he rounded a corner in the outer dungeon one day and ran into a small girl who screamed and rushed behind the skirt of her mother, he had realized, with a descent of the heart, what his donning of a Seeker's hood would mean for his life.

But not so long ago he had thought to spend his life confined within a cell, or lying in cold ashes within a burial pit. This transition could not be as hard a sacrifice for him as it must have been for Layle. He looked again at

the High Seeker, but Layle's gaze travelled past him toward a black-hooded figure approaching them.

"Mr. Chapman," Layle said with cool formality. "You allowed your junior day guard early release. I trust this means you will not be working overduty once more."

The other Seeker raised his fingers to the eye-holes of his hood and rubbed his eyelids. "I wish that were the case. Alas, no, I need to do more research into my prisoner's case."

"And Mr. Gerson?" The High Seeker's voice remained uninformative.

"Had me stretched on the rack with his complaints about working late." The Seeker sounded wry, if somewhat weary. "Today, I told him that he could go off-duty early, once he'd delivered my message to you."

"He gave Mr. Sobel your message."

Mr. Chapman released his breath slowly, as though his lungs were a pair of bellows blowing at a faint spark. "I'll speak to him of it tomorrow. If I have the time and energy." He rubbed his eyelids again.

"I understand from your note that your prisoner has been of trouble to you." The High Seeker's voice remained formal.

Mr. Chapman gave a slight shrug. "Less so than your prisoner. I'm sorry yours has been causing you such grief."

Elsdon was surprised by the warmth in the Seeker's voice, less so by the coolness of Layle's response. "He has reason to hold out, if my surmises are correct. Mr. Chapman, I don't believe you've yet met our new Seeker-in-Training. Mr. Taylor, Mr. Chapman is the senior Seeker who has charge over this dungeon during the day shift."

Elsdon stiffened, as he might have done if his schoolmaster were presenting him to a distinguished visitor. Something made him relax again as Mr. Chapman turned to look at him.

"Ah, yes," Mr. Chapman said. "Some of our prisoners aren't satisfied with holding out on us; some of them demand room and board and a chance to dress up like us. Mr. Taylor, the weary figure you behold before you is

what the High Seeker looked like when he was searching you. If you could frustrate Mr. Smith so thoroughly, I've no doubt you'll have the skills needed to search prisoners. Would you mind taking mine?"

Elsdon grinned, forgetting that the Seeker could not see his face. Layle said, "We should speak of your case. Mr. Taylor, if you will excuse me a minute . . ."

Elsdon heard the official dismissal in the High Seeker's voice and withdrew hastily, making his way toward the front of the dungeon's entry hall. His footsteps echoed above him, nearly lost in the chatter of the guards. The entry hall, unlike the remainder of the Eternal Dungeon, had no ceiling and only one man-made wall; the remainder of the hall was open to the natural curve of the cavern walls, creating an eerie reverberation of sounds. The guards' voices were tossed into the air and bounced about as though they were balls being thrown back and forth by small children. Amidst all the light conversation, Elsdon's progress went unnoticed.

The edges of the entry hall shone with lamplight. He looked for a shadowy place where he could hide himself and found it by a door along the broad wall behind the Record-keeper's desk. He stood in front of the closed door, gazing at the bright tables around the hall and listening to the equally bright chatter, as he wondered why this place – the first portion of the dungeon he had seen three months before – looked so unfamiliar.

"Excuse me, sir."

He recognized the firm voice of the Record-keeper and looked about to see which Seeker Mr. Aaron was addressing. Then he remembered, and he turned round.

The Record-keeper was standing in the doorway, his arms filled with ledger books. Beyond him, through the open doorway, Elsdon could see row upon row of books and document boxes. He withdrew hastily, with a low-voiced apology. The Record-keeper said, "Not at all, sir," in his brisk manner and moved over to his desk, where he placed the books with as much gentleness as his voice lacked.

Elsdon took a few steps back from the doorway, searching for another hiding place, but his attention was arrested by the tablet on the wall behind him. Nestled between the door he had been standing in front of and another door further down the wall, the tablet soared to the ceiling, as though it were the school-slateboard of a giant's child. Chalked upon the tablet were hundreds of names.

They were neatly divided into columns, each column headed with the number of a breaking cell. Elsdon knew by now that only one of the names in each column, the name at the top, represented a prisoner presently being searched. The rest of the names were of past prisoners, and most of the names were crossed out.

He felt a heaviness, staring at all of the names lined out, and his heaviness increased in the next moment as the Record-keeper, walking over to the tablet, casually erased a name in one of the columns.

He bit his lip, watching as the Record-keeper climbed a ladder and transferred a name from the top of the column to the empty space, then placed a line through that name. After a while, Elsdon became aware that someone was standing beside him.

He turned his head. Layle was watching, not the tablet, but Elsdon; he said nothing. Elsdon swallowed around the hardness in his throat and said, "I hate seeing that. Names crossed out, and then erased. It's as though we've forgotten they existed."

Layle made no protest at this bit of sentimentality. Instead he said, in a low voice that did not carry to any of the guards around them, "We keep the names there as long as possible – in many cases, prisoners who are executed have no friends or family mourning them, so we try to do our part in remembering them. And even after their names are erased, their records are kept eternally within this dungeon." He pointed at the tablet and said, "I trust that you have noticed that name."

Elsdon had to bend his body to see. Toward the bottom of the column marked *4* was a name, remarkable only because it was one of the few that was circled rather than lined out. It read, "E. Taylor."

He straightened his back, smiling, and then his smile faded as he felt the chillness of the entry hall touch his blood again. "I'm not sure that's any better," he said. "We call ourselves prisoners, because we took an oath of eternal commitment, but we're better off than most of the prisoners who pass through here – not only are we allowed to live, but we're free to walk about the dungeon. We aren't confined to our cells, like the prisoners who are searched. We're more privileged than they are."

The High Seeker made no reply, but turned and beckoned toward a guard who was just entering the entry hall from the door leading to the Seekers' cells and the outer dungeon. Layle put out his hand, and the guard, seemingly needing no further instruction, unfastened his coiled whip from his belt and handed it to the High Seeker.

"Thank you, Mr. Urman," Layle murmured. He began to uncurl the whip, saying to Elsdon, "Look at the top of the tablet."

Elsdon raised his eyes. There, above the column numbers, were the names of all the Seekers, familiar to him through study, if not always through acquaintance. Layle's name was there in his own handwriting, as was Mr. Chapman's in a different handwriting, but Elsdon could not see his own name.

Then he noticed what lay beside the names, and his breath whistled in. He looked over at Layle, who nodded. The High Seeker said, "If I should ever break the rules of the *Code of Seeking* in so serious a fashion as to warrant my arrest, I will be placed in this breaking cell—"

With a suddenness that made Elsdon jump, Layle moved the whip in his hand, apparently without effort, and the line flew upward, its tip striking the number *1* beside Layle's name.

Layle said, in the same calm voice as before, "And if I should compound my error by breaking the Code while I am being searched, and if my Seeker should deem such a measure necessary, I will then be placed in this room—"

Again the whip leapt, like a lithe stallion raising its forefeet and striking, this time touching the letter *A* beside Layle's name.

In the next moment, Layle had coiled the whip and was handing it back to the guard, who appeared unsurprised by this display; he moved over to join the other guards. The guards' conversation had stilled momentarily. Elsdon could see several of the senior guards watching Layle with envy.

It was in Elsdon's mind to ask Layle where he had learned to use a whip like that. Elsdon knew that Seekers were given only minimal training with a whip, since they were forbidden from touching prisoners with hand or weapon unless the prisoners made a murderous attack on a prison worker. But Elsdon's mind turned back to what Layle had shown him; he found that he was staring at the tiny number and letter beside the High Seeker's name.

"We are privileged, as you said," the High Seeker told him in a low voice. "But our privileges exist only as long as we adhere to the Code of this dungeon. If we fail to behave in a manner worthy of the honors that have been bestowed upon us, we are treated no differently from any other prisoner." He turned toward the Record-keeper's desk, scooped up a piece of chalk lying there, and silently offered it to Elsdon.

Elsdon took it without speaking. He sucked in a deep breath and then, amidst the renewed chatter of the guards, walked forward to climb the ladder beside the tablet.

He had just finished writing under Layle's name, "E. Taylor – 4, A," when a groaning creak behind him alerted him to a new arrival. And with the arrival came an immediate transformation.

All around the entry hall, the guards fell silent. Those who were closest to the lamps reached forward and pulled down the shutters around the lights, causing the edges of the room to turn black, hiding the tables and guards. The Record-keeper, who had been heading toward his documents library, quickly turned and seated himself behind his desk, folded his hands, and waited.

Above, in the passage leading down from the gates, walked three figures. The figure in the middle was bound.

Elsdon made his way down the stepladder as quickly and quietly as he could. Already Layle was beckoning him, and as he reached the ground,

the High Seeker put his hand against the area of Elsdon's back between his shoulder-blades and propelled him into the room to the right of the tablet. Elsdon could guess why – he knew that he was not yet authorized to be in the same room as a prisoner – but he still had to catch his breath a moment from this sudden abduction.

The door closed behind him, shutting out light and sound. He heard Layle stepping nearby and had a moment to reflect that one thing had not changed in three months' time: Elsdon still feared being alone in the dark with the High Seeker. Then a match scratched, and a second later an oil lamp flickered dim light about the room.

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Layle moved about silently, lighting all the lamps, which gave Elsdon time to take in his surroundings. There was little to see: the room was no larger than a breaking cell, and it was furnished with nothing except a desk, two chairs, and a shelf holding documents boxes and books. Elsdon bent down to look at the titles, expecting more of the gory subject matter with which Layle dutifully filled his private quarters, but to his surprise the books here were of the ordinary sort: language dictionaries, atlases, and even an occasional light novel like the ones that the boys at Elsdon's school had been fond of.

"This is odd," Elsdon said, straightening his back. "It's as though your leisure activities have become part of your duties, while your work has become your leisure."

"You're not the first to remark that."

Elsdon looked over at the High Seeker, who had seated himself behind his desk, his face still hood-dark. "Who else said that?" Elsdon asked.

A pause ensued before Layle replied, "Mr. Zinner, who trained as a Seeker a number of years ago. Please have a seat, Mr. Taylor."

Elsdon accepted the hint, not only from Layle's words, but also from the fact that the High Seeker had not raised his face-cloth. Perching himself on the edge of the chair opposite Layle's desk, Elsdon tried to hold himself

in the formal pose he had used on the days when, as a schoolboy, he was called into the head schoolmaster's office.

Layle pulled from his inner shirt-pocket a cloth, extracted from it a chain whose keys had been wrapped so as to avoid clanging against one another, and placed one of the keys in the lock of his desk drawer. Presently he drew forth a loosely bound ledger and laid it open upon the table.

"'Elsdon Auburn Taylor,'" he read aloud. "'Born the 1st month of 337. 355 (fourth month): Arrested for murder. Transferred from Parkside Prison—'" He stopped, looked up at Elsdon, and said in a voice that sounded amused, "Your records start like mine."

"Only you came here as a prison worker rather than as a prisoner." Elsdon tried to keep his voice light, though his fists were beginning to clench.

Layle looked down at the records again. "'Request for transfer to Park Lane Youth Prison denied—'"

Startled, Elsdon leaned forward. "I didn't know of that."

"I requested the transfer upon your arrival here," Layle said without looking up. "It would have saved you from facing a death sentence. You were only three months over your birthday of adulthood, so the youth prison was willing to take you. However, your father's permission was needed for the transfer, and he denied it."

Elsdon felt the tension return to his body. Layle read aloud, "'Assigned to Breaking Cell 4, under the searching of the High Seeker. Given three light lashes upon the first day, as the result of the High Seeker's mistaken belief that the prisoner had violated the Code.'" Layle glanced briefly at Elsdon before looking back down at the paper. "'Confessed on the fifth day to murdering his sister, Sara Eleanor Taylor. Sentenced to be hanged by the magistrates' court. Offered eternal confinement within the Eternal Dungeon by recommendation of the High Seeker. Voluntarily took the oath of eternal commitment—'"

"What would have happened if I had refused to take the oath?" Elsdon asked.

"You would have remained eternally confined," Layle said, his gaze still fixed to the records, "but you would not have been offered the opportunity to train as a Seeker. 'Recommended for training as a Seeker by the High Seeker. Recommendation accepted by the Codifier, the Magisterial Guild, and the Queen. Training delayed in order to permit Mr. Taylor to heal from his searching.'"

Layle pushed back the records, contemplated for a moment the silver inkwell on his desk, and then looked steadily at Elsdon. Through the closed door of the office, Elsdon could hear the dim sound of a voice speaking stiffly – one of the visiting prison guards, he guessed, giving the Record-keeper the information needed for the transfer of the prisoner. All else was quiet; the High Seeker's office contained no water-clock.

"You understand," said Layle, "that even with your oath given, being a Seeker is a privilege, one that can be withdrawn at any time. We wield great power over the men and women we search, and unless we demonstrate ourselves to be worthy of that power, we are not permitted to remain hooded."

Elsdon nodded. "So if I broke the Queen's laws again . . ."

"You are no longer governed by the Queen's laws but by the Code. However, we treat the Code as seriously as the magistrates treat the Queen's laws. If, for example, you were to permit an unauthorized person access to a prisoner's records or a Seeker's writings, you would find yourself in much the same position a murderer or rapist faces in the magistrates' court—"

He stopped abruptly, and Elsdon saw the skin around his eyes tighten, as though a thought had come to him. Elsdon did not wait for the voicing of that thought, though. He said in a strained tone, "Is that why you won't let me train? Because you believe I'll break the Code?"

The High Seeker leaned back in his chair, the closest he had come to informality since he entered his office. "What makes you think I won't let you train?"

"I've been here for three months." Elsdon found that he was having a hard time speaking; it took little effort to keep his voice quiet, so that the

prisoner outside would not hear this conversation. "I've long since healed from my imprisonment. I thought – I thought perhaps you've been waiting to see whether I could be trusted to keep the Code."

Layle remained in the same position, leaning back in the chair. "No," he said, "I have no doubt that you have as much ability to keep the Code as any of the rest of us. The question is whether beginning your training now would bring harm, given your continued anger toward your father."

Elsdon stared at Layle, his eyes wide in the dim light of the office. Several of the lamps, low in oil, were beginning to sputter, casting up dark clouds of smoke which travelled up toward the room's ventilated ceiling. Layle's black figure seemed dimmer than before.

"I don't understand," said Elsdon. "You encouraged me to realize the truth about my father. When I first arrived here, I hated myself – I blamed myself for all that had occurred between my father and me. You released me from that."

Amidst the dusky smoke, Layle said, "If I have released you from one hate, only to imprison you in another, the matter is not improved. Mr. Taylor, your father is a criminal – unimprisoned because we lack sufficient evidence to arrest him. But he is as much a criminal as the men and women you will search as a Seeker. If your anger continues against him, it is likely that you will eventually transfer that anger onto one of the prisoners in this dungeon."

Elsdon said, "You mean the way I did to Sara."

He forgot to keep his voice low; Layle jerked his head in a warning manner toward the door. Elsdon tried to relax, but it was of no use. He found himself rising from his chair, so that he was looking down upon the High Seeker.

"Sir," he said in a tight voice, "my father was a sadist – a cold, brutal man who had a twisted notion of love. So vicious was he that he taught me to blame myself for his cruelty. I blamed myself for everything, including Sara's murder."

The High Seeker said quietly, "I am glad that you have come to realize that you are not entirely to blame for what happened."

"I'm not to blame at all!"

The High Seeker leaned forward then, placing his arms upon the table. "I thought that you had not yet regained your memory of what happened."

"I remember enough to know that my hand killed Sara." Elsdon felt the familiar ache begin in his throat. "It was my hand, but it was my father's doing. I'm sure of that now. I was merely the instrument he used to abuse Sara, as he abused me. How can I forgive a man like that, High Seeker? Forgiving him for what he did to me would be hard enough, but to forgive him for killing my sweet sister, who never harmed anyone in her life . . ."

Tears were travelling hot down his face now; he struggled to bar their escape from his eyes. Layle opened his mouth, but at that moment there came a bang from the back of the room.

Elsdon turned to see that Garrett had flung the door open. Several yards behind him, staring into the High Seeker's office, was the newly arrived prisoner.

He was about Layle's age, in his mid-thirties, and he had a scar across his cheek that would have made him look dangerous under ordinary circumstances. Now, though, with his arms pinioned behind his back by leather straps, he looked as defenseless as a small child. His eyes were wide as he stared at the hooded Seeker next to the door. Elsdon saw the prisoner's throat move as he swallowed.

Elsdon felt as though someone had flung open a door while he was undressing. Then he remembered that, thanks to Layle's foresight, his tear-stained face was covered with a Seeker's hood. The prisoner could not see the angry, hurt child that had spoken moments before. All he saw was the man who might be his torturer.

Feeling a dizziness overcome him, Elsdon was only dimly aware of Garrett moving toward Layle. The guard slapped a paper onto the table before the High Seeker, saying, "The Codifier told me I need your signature on this request for an extra day off each month."

Layle did not move from where he sat, his hands folded upon Elsdon's records, which he had closed some time during the past few seconds. "Tell me, Mr. Gerson," he said in a conversational manner, "where you come from, are people in the habit of knocking upon doors?"

Garrett's face drained of color within the next breath, and Elsdon had a moment to reflect that the High Seeker never lacked skill at pinpointing a person's most vulnerable aspect. Then Garrett said stiffly, "Yes, sir."

"And did your childhood training extend as far as closing doors through which you have walked?"

Garrett's lips thinned. Without a word he spun and strode over to the door, which he slammed shut, cutting off sight of the bound prisoner, who had been watching Elsdon all this while.

Layle made no further remark. He picked up the paper Garrett had placed before him and began to read it, as carefully as though it were the *Code of Seeking*. Garrett moved over to his side and pointed to the bottom of the paper, saying, "I just need your signature there."

Layle nodded silently, continuing to read. Garrett moved a few steps behind him, looked over at Elsdon, and suddenly grinned. His hand moved to his dagger.

Elsdon, who knew Garrett well enough to guess what would come next, bit his lip to keep quiet, which caused Garrett's grin to broaden. He eased the dagger out soundlessly while Layle pulled the inkwell toward him, tipping it as he dipped his pen into the ink. As the High Seeker began to write at the bottom of the paper, Garrett raised his blade-clutching hand and pretended to stab the High Seeker several times.

Elsdon nearly laughed. In a dungeon where everyone walked in tiptoes around the much-feared High Seeker, Elsdon found Garrett's irreverent attitude to be remarkably refreshing. It was the main reason he endured Garrett's perennial grumbles and cynicism; Elsdon could always count on the guard to pinpoint the humorous aspects of Layle's dark reputation. Even so, Elsdon cast a worried glance at Layle.

The High Seeker did not pause in his writing; his eyes remained fixed on the page as he said, "Mr. Gerson."

"Yes, Mr. Smith?" Garrett stabbed the air above Layle several more times, his eyes dancing as he looked over at Elsdon.

Layle still did not look up. "Do you wish for me to demonstrate to you one of the methods by which Seekers are trained to disable prisoners who threaten their lives?"

Garrett stood frozen, his arm raised in mid-stab. "No, sir," he said after a moment.

"Then I suggest that you sheathe your blade." Layle pushed aside the paper, adding, "Request denied. You may tell the Codifier that I have changed your schedule. Until you are notified by me, you will work from the beginning of the day shift until two hours after the beginning of the night shift."

"What?" Garrett's voice was sharp as he sheathed his dagger. He rushed over to the front of the table to confront the High Seeker. "You can't do that! It's summertime! I already work a fifteen-hour day at this time of year. I'm not going to give up all my leisure time for—"

"Mr. Gerson." The High Seeker's voice remained conversational. "Will you hand me your whip, please?"

Silence followed. Outside the office, the dungeon guards were chatting again; Elsdon guessed that the prisoner had been taken to his breaking cell, and that the entry hall was once more lit and cheerful. Garrett, his face expressionless, placed his whip upon the table.

Layle took the black coil into his hands, then leaned back in his chair, drawing the leather lash through his fingers as though it were the sleek stem of a flower. "Mr. Taylor," he said, turning his head toward Elsdon, "you may occasionally encounter the problem of impertinent and disrespectful prisoners. You will not want the matter to proceed so far that you must invoke the Code's penalties against such discourtesy, so it is best to impress upon the prisoner what power you hold over him. Different Seekers have different methods of doing this—"

In an instant, without turning his head toward Garrett or moving from his lazy position of leaning back in the chair, Layle struck the whip in the air twice. Elsdon caught only a blur of the movement as the lash cracked on both sides of Garrett's face. A sound escaped the guard's throat, but he stood as immobile as Elsdon had been when the bats dove at him.

"I find that symbolic imagery usually serves best to impress the truth upon the prisoner." Layle curled the whip into a circle and tossed it lightly onto the desk. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Gerson. You may go now."

Garrett leaned forward slowly to take both the whip and the paper he had given the High Seeker. From where Elsdon stood, he could see Garrett's face clearly: it was white and covered with sweat, but the whip had not marked him. The guard left the office without a word, closing the door softly behind him.

Elsdon looked over at Layle, who had leaned forward and slipped his hands underneath his hood, so as to cover his face. Elsdon asked, "Is that the darkness?"

Layle's hands retreated as he looked up at Elsdon questioningly.

"Mr. Sobel told me once that I hadn't seen the darkest part of you," Elsdon explained. "He said that it emerged only when you were with the worst prisoners."

Layle gave a humorless chuckle. "Mr. Gerson is hardly on the same level as the worst prisoners we deal with. —Thank you." This as Elsdon came forward and handed Layle the pen that he was groping for.

"How did you know what he was doing behind you?" Elsdon asked as Layle put the pen aside. "Does that hood of yours hide a second pair of eyes?"

"Come behind me and see."

Hesitantly, Elsdon did so; his heart was racing by the time he reached the spot where Garrett had stood. Layle reached forward to the inkwell. As the High Seeker tilted it, Elsdon could see his own reflection upon its silver face.

"You'll learn tricks like that during your training," Layle said as Elsdon returned to the front of the table. "The safest course, though, is never to turn your back on a prisoner. Never trust a prisoner – for that matter, be wary of offering your trust to any person in this dungeon, whether they be an outer dungeon laborer or a guard or even a fellow Seeker. You're in a position of power now, and you're surrounded by people who will take advantage of that power if they can."

Elsdon frowned. "Trust no one? Sir, that can't be right. I thought that Seekers were supposed to establish trust between themselves and the prisoners."

Layle stood, his posture returned to stiff formality. "Establish trust, yes, but not give it unearned. We have a saying about that in the dungeon, but I doubt that you'll understand it till the first time you trust someone and they take advantage of your trust." He picked up Elsdon's records, slipped them into the drawer, and locked the drawer. "It seems that even here we cannot converse without interruption. It is of no matter. I know where we can go where we will not be disturbed."

Elsdon did not speak as Layle extinguished the lamps. It had come to him, like the crack of a lash, that all the words Layle had spoken during the past few minutes were words of training, and that Elsdon had finally been granted the privilege to see the High Seeker at his work. He felt excitement build within him. As Layle reached the door and opened it, Elsdon said, "Sir! What is the dungeon's saying about trust? I'm sure I could understand it now."

Layle looked back at Elsdon. Under the dim light, his eyes hid within the holes of the hood. He said softly, "The saying goes: To be a Seeker is to know betrayal."

CHAPTER THREE

The corridor was cold. It was always cold. Elsdon had been startled when he first learned that the prisoners being searched were the only dungeon inhabitants granted the luxury of a furnace. He had grown accustomed since then to the dungeon's autumn chill, which remained the same year-round.

Much like its master. He stole a look at the High Seeker as they walked side by side down the corridor between the prisoners' cells, passing an occasional pair of guards flanking the door to a cell that was in use.

"You must never lie to a prisoner," the High Seeker said. "The Code is quite strict about that, and equally strict in its penalties for violation of this rule. You must never lie, though you may often be called upon to mislead."

"What is the difference?" Elsdon asked, his mind only half fastened upon what the High Seeker was saying. His thoughts were instead upon the stiffness of Layle's posture, which he remembered from the day they first met. Layle had only relaxed that stiffness once during Elsdon's imprisonment, when Elsdon was being beaten; it had given Elsdon a mistaken impression of the High Seeker's character. Since that time, Elsdon had seen the High Seeker relaxed and informal many times – but only when he was alone with Elsdon, in the privacy of Layle's cell.

"I misled you when you were my prisoner," the High Seeker replied. "I led you to believe that I was searching you for the truth about the crime you were accused of committing, when in fact I was setting up the conditions by which you would break yourself and admit your wrongdoing. Were you resentful of my misleading when you learned of it?"

Elsdon did not have to think back that far. He shook his head at once. "I knew that you had done it for my sake."

"But if I had lied to you – if I had told you that my questions to you were aimed at my breaking you – would that have made a difference in how you regarded me?"

Elsdon nodded slowly. They had passed into darkness: no lamps lit this end of the corridor, and no guards stood in front of the doors here. The High Seeker paused before one of the doors and pulled his ring of keys from his inner pocket. He slipped off one of the keys and handed it to Elsdon.

"This is a master key," he said in a low tone. "It will open any cell where prisoners are searched. Under ordinary circumstances you will not need to use it – the guards will let you in and out of any cell where a prisoner is present – but you may need it in an emergency. Keep the key under your pillow when you sleep and within your inner pocket when you're awake, and never allow a prisoner to guess that you hold it. Some prisoners would kill you to possess that key."

His voice was matter-of-fact. Elsdon carefully threaded the key onto his own key-ring, which so far carried only the keys to his cell and Layle's. He was slipping the ring back into his inner pocket when Layle gestured toward the door they stood before.

Elsdon leaned forward and fumbled with the lock in the dark corridor. He did not succeed in turning the key until Layle, stepping further down the corridor, retrieved a lamp from where it hung on the wall and brought it over to illuminate the door. Elsdon had just time enough to see what was written above the door before he stepped inside and Layle's light caught the contents of the interior. Then Elsdon forgot to breathe.

The room was slightly larger than a breaking cell, but colder; the cell did not end against a furnace-warmed wall, as a breaking cell would, but instead against the same cold stone that lined the other walls. Upon this stone hung black objects of varying sizes. They were too far hidden into the shadows for Elsdon to catch more than a glimpse of them: something narrow and pointed, something else long and sharp, something else blunt and hard . . .

His mind was not upon the wall decorations. All of his attention was focussed upon the great table in the midst of the room, and the straps at its head and foot.

He felt Layle's hand upon his shoulder, and he jerked away from the touch automatically. Then he forced himself to remember that he was a Seeker.

This was his workplace; he ought not to be reacting as though he were a prisoner being brought here. He sucked in several breaths of chill air, then walked forward and inspected the rack more closely.

From the books Layle had instructed him to read, Elsdon knew that racks came in many shapes. This one was of a simple design. The foot of it held a fixed bar with straps on it for the ankles; the head of the rack held a moveable bar with straps for the wrists. The most impressive feature of the rack was not the bars or straps but the giant wheel which controlled the moveable bar. It was placed flat against the head of the rack and was nearly as high as a man. Approaching it, Elsdon found that his chin barely rose over it, and his arms must be spread nearly to full width to span the circle. The wheel led to a mechanism that was unintelligible to Elsdon, but he could see that the movement of the wheel was divided into exact intervals by a series of notches hidden from the view of any prisoner who lay upon the rack. Indeed, only the guard controlling the rack would be able to see the notches, Elsdon decided, peering down at the hidden control. The levels inscribed upon the control went from zero to ten, and four notches quartered each level.

His gaze wandered back to the moveable bar, and from there to the straps. He swallowed.

"How much does this stretch the prisoner?" he heard himself ask in a hollow voice.

"Hold onto a strap and see," the High Seeker suggested.

Moving cautiously round to the side of the rack, Elsdon picked up one of the straps; it was made of calfskin and was soft to the touch. He took firm hold of the strap, then braced himself.

The High Seeker, standing now at the wheel, turned it minutely. There was a click, and the strap tugged slightly in Elsdon's hand, as a child might tug at the hand of a parent.

Elsdon looked over at the High Seeker, startled. "That didn't hurt!"

"It's more impressive when accompanied by the lecture of a Seeker, explaining the terrible effects of the machine," Layle said dryly. "But no,

the rack's primary purpose is not to hurt the prisoner – it is to drive fear into the prisoner. We use it only on the worst prisoners, the ones who have broken the Code repeatedly and without remorse. Such prisoners are unlikely to break through pain alone; fear is the best weapon we can use against them."

Elsdon let the strap drop and went over to Layle's side. The wheel had turned over to the first notch, one quarter of the way from zero to one. "But is the rack dangerous to the prisoner?"

"Not at the lower levels. At the higher levels . . . In theory, a healthy man should not receive permanent damage if he is placed at level ten. But we cannot always know the full state of health of our prisoners, despite the dungeon healer's careful examination of their medical records. We have had prisoners suffer heart death while on the rack."

Again, his voice was matter-of-fact. Elsdon gave him a sharp look. After a moment, Layle added, "All rackings must be approved by me, and I rarely permit Seekers to take their prisoners beyond level three. The primary point of this room, as I say, is not to cause pain, but to cause fear. Hence the decorations." He waved his hand toward the walls.

The lamp, which Layle had laid upon the groin-high bed of the rack, did not quite shed its light upon the walls. Elsdon had to go over to the wall and touch one of the objects before he could be sure of what hung there. Then he looked back at Layle and said, in a voice that he hoped was steady, "These are from the old dungeon?"

"The royal dungeon that existed in Yclau before the Eternal Dungeon was formed? No, those were destroyed at the time that the *Code of Seeking* was first issued. These belong to me."

Elsdon stared at him, his hand dropping from the black iron. "You collect instruments of *torture*?"

"Antique ones." Layle's voice was bland. "Some of the dealers who sell the books I own also sell objects such as these. Hung here, they make a great impression upon prisoners entering this cell. We've had prisoners break the moment they saw these instruments—"

"—thus saving you from having to rack the prisoners. Yes, I see." Elsdon ran his hand over the iron, which was thin at one end, but gradually grew into a globular shape. At the other end of the instrument, a pair of long handles regulated by a notched bar allowed the instrument to be slowly opened. "What is this?" Elsdon asked.

The High Seeker stepped forward and slid his palm lightly over the surface of the cold metal, as a man might slide his hand along a cheek. "This," he said, "is the Swelling Globe. It is no longer in use in most countries of the world, though it continues to be used in Vovim – this is a Vovimian model."

"The books you had me read say that the Vovimian torturers are the most barbaric men of that barbarian culture," commented Elsdon.

The High Seeker's gaze did not stray from the object he was stroking. "The books are right. If you want to know what Yclau's dungeon was like in the years before the Code was compiled, you need only look to Vovim's Hidden Dungeon. The Vovimians continue to practice methods of breaking that all civilized countries have abandoned."

"How is the Swelling Globe used?"

For the first time, Layle looked over at Elsdon. His hand dropped from the metal. "It was used in the prisoners' orifices," he said coolly. "I will lend you a book that describes the exact nature of its use. Do you have any other questions while we are here?"

"Yes," said Elsdon. "I'm wondering whether the question you were afraid I'd ask earlier was whether you ever take love-mates."

His school days were not long over; he could still remember vividly the varied expressions on his schoolmasters' faces when he would unexpectedly ask questions that would turn a class discussion upon its head. Some of his schoolmasters had been angry; others, for reasons he had not fully understood at the time, had been pleased. He now knew, as he had not known in those days, that this gift for being able to take other people by surprise was one of his qualifications for being a Seeker. Yet it was still startling to see Layle suddenly jerk his head away, and to know that he had succeeded in catching the High Seeker off-guard.

After a moment, the High Seeker said in a detached voice, "As I stated earlier, I do not consider it wise for a senior Seeker to enter into bonds with a Seeker he supervises."

"But you supervise all of the Seekers – does that mean you never take a love-mate? Surely the Code doesn't require the High Seeker to be celibate. If it did, then it would spell out so important a rule more clearly."

He waited breathlessly for the next few moments, trying to read what he could from Layle's rigid posture – the High Seeker's face was still turned away. Then the High Seeker moved.

Not toward him; away from him, rounding the head of the rack so that he stood half-hidden by the opposite side of the table. When this was done, he turned his face back. His eyes were now as cool as they ever were, dark under the dim lamplight.

"It was a personal decision," the High Seeker said impassively, "and as such is not a proper subject for conversation during my on-duty hours. Do you have any other questions? If not, then I must start my preparations for searching my prisoner tonight."

His tone was dismissive. Elsdon felt desperation well within him, coalescing into a hardness inside his throat.

"Please," he said, keeping his voice soft, "you must know why I'm asking this. Even if you don't want— If you want me to go away, I will, but I need to know whether it bothers you. That I feel this way. If you think it's wrong for me to feel this – if it's a violation of my duty as a Seeker or as your friend – I could try to stop myself—"

He broke off. As he was speaking, he had taken a step toward the High Seeker, following Layle's path over to the side of the rack. Now the High Seeker moved again, turning to round the corner at the foot of the rack, so that he remained half-hidden from Elsdon.

Elsdon possessed several qualities which qualified him to be a Seeker, but the most important was this: he could read words and gestures to understand what lay beneath them. He had not used that skill on all occasions in his life. His strong desire to please his father had blinded

him, making him incapable of recognizing the truth about his father's abusive nature. And there had been times – more times than Elsdon liked to think of – when his wild anger against a bully-boy blinded him to the boy's better nature. But discernment was a skill that had served him well more than once in the schoolyard, and now, without warning, it came into play once more.

Few other men, had they been standing in that room, would have understood Layle's withdrawal to be anything other than an indication that the High Seeker wished to remain distant. But Elsdon – his mind adding up the dim light, the height of the rack, and the height of the High Seeker – recognized what those other men would have missed.

His breath whistled in. The High Seeker stiffened yet further. Speaking softly, as though uttering sacred words, Elsdon said, "You want me."

Layle did not reply. Elsdon moved toward him slowly, as though toward a frightened animal. As he rounded the corner of the rack, he was careful to keep his eyes fixed upon Layle's hooded eyes rather than look lower. The High Seeker did not withdraw this time, nor turn his gaze away, but his hand tightened upon the fixed bar of the rack.

"It's all right," said Elsdon, keeping his voice soft as he halted, an arm's length from Layle. "Even if you only want a night with me—"

"No!" Layle's voice held horror, like that of man who, being presented with a twelve-course meal, is told that he will only be granted a quarter of an hour in which to consume it.

"Well, then . . ." Elsdon's voice trailed off; he was struggling to hold back the impulse to grab the High Seeker and kiss him with passionate joy. Every part of his body was throbbing hard now.

The High Seeker closed his eyes and let out his breath slowly. "Mr. Taylor," he said, his tone still formal, "I did not make lightly my decision not to enter into bonds with other Seekers."

"You said that you won't bond with Seekers you supervise. Is that the real reason you won't bond with me? If there's something about me that bothers you . . ."

Layle's fingernails dug into the wood of the fixed bar. He had turned his head away again. Elsdon waited, his Seekerly sense warning him not to press the matter, though his body continued to throb.

After a moment, the High Seeker made a sound in his throat, and with a sudden jerk of movement he took from his trouser pocket two items: a pencil and one of the stiff cards that Seekers carried at all times. Bending over, he wrote down a few words, then handed the card to Elsdon, who stared at the three names written there. "What is this?" Elsdon asked.

"My prior love-mates," Layle replied. "You will not be able to contact Mr. Partridge or Mr. Zinner, but I suggest that you consult their records. In the case of Mr. Chapman, you can supplement his records by speaking with him—"

"Layle!" Elsdon stared with wide eyes at the High Seeker. "Are you giving me *references*?"

"I'm on duty," the High Seeker reminded him in a chill voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," Elsdon replied quickly. He looked down at the list again, then crumpled it and let it fall to the floor.

Layle said nothing; he simply scooped up the card, smoothed it out, turned it over to its blank side, and wrote something there. As he finished, he said quietly, "This gives you permission to consult my sealed records. —No," he added, cutting off Elsdon's protests. "This is not a matter I will discuss further with you until you know more about me. If, after you have made your investigations, you wish to talk about what you have learned, you may come to my cell two hours before the night shift begins tomorrow. If you would prefer not to discuss it, then come to my office at the beginning of the night shift, and we will discuss how to begin your training."

As he spoke, he slipped the card into Elsdon's trouser pocket. Doing so required him to step close to Elsdon, and for a moment afterwards Layle was still, his hand in Elsdon's pocket, his hooded face close to Elsdon's.

The sound of a door banging open startled both of them into leaping apart. Turning his head, Elsdon saw a young woman standing at the door with bucket and mop in hand.

"Oh!" said the serving-woman. "I'm sorry, sirs. I didn't realize this cell was in use." She gave a lingering look at Elsdon, then a narrower look at the High Seeker, and then closed the door.

The High Seeker sighed, turning to inspect one of the straps on the rack. "Another lesson I failed to mention is that you should always lock the door to any room in which you plan to hold private conversations with other Seekers. Otherwise you will learn – as you are about to learn – how well oiled the gossip circuit is in this dungeon."

"Sir, I didn't mean to—"

"Tomorrow," the High Seeker said firmly. "We'll discuss this tomorrow, after your research, should you still wish to do so. Or we'll discuss your training at my office. In either case, I have work to do."

Elsdon dared not ignore the tone of dismissal in Layle's voice. He walked rapidly back to the door and stepped into the corridor. But when he turned to close the door behind him, he saw that the High Seeker was looking, not at the strap he was testing in his hand, but at Elsdon.

Then the High Seeker turned his head away, as though his interest had been caught by the mysterious object called the Swelling Globe, and Elsdon softly closed the door.

o—o—o

"I must have been mad!" cried Elsdon Taylor. "What made me do it?"

Garrett, who was dividing his soiled clothes into piles – he didn't possess a Seeker's privilege of being cared for by a serving-woman – paused to look up at the young Seeker holding his head in his hands as he stared upward for an answer.

"Do you know that some spiders will wait for days in order to lure their selected prey into their webs?" Garrett asked conversationally. "Their patience is legendary in the animal queendom."

"You have spiders in your room?" Taylor said in a distracted manner, obviously having no interest in Garrett's words.

Garrett sighed. Sometimes he wondered what sort of qualifications Seekers needed, other than high birth. He tried again. "Maybe it's what he wanted."

"Wanted?" Taylor looked at Garrett with the expression of a small boy who has wandered into a wagering room and is stunned by what he sees there. "You told me the High Seeker wanted someone inexperienced – how could he want me to be so bold as to press him into love?"

It was impossible to resist. Garrett threw aside his original words and said, "Some men like that, you know. They like juniors who are bold to them. Smith respects me all the more because I don't grovel to him, like some of the other guards do."

Taylor said nothing. He had an irritating habit of remaining silent whenever he disagreed with Garrett, which made it difficult to argue with him. Annoyed, Garrett threw the last of his soiled clothes into one of the piles and said, "You got what you wanted, didn't you? You've got your chance to go to bed with Smith."

"After I do research on him, he says. Research! What kind of cold-blooded request is that? Next he'll be asking me to write up a report on him, citing my sources."

"Perhaps that's his problem." Garrett seated himself, wrapping his legs around the back of a chair. "Perhaps his previous love-bonds ended because he was too cold. Perhaps he doesn't know the proper way to court someone he loves."

Garrett wondered, as he spoke, whether there was any truth to what he said. It puzzled him, why he was taking so much trouble to lead Taylor down this path. It wasn't as though he disliked the boy – the truth was, Garrett was closer to Taylor than anyone else in the dungeon. Taylor knew, as no one else here did, what it was like to have your childhood stripped from you by your father. If circumstances had been different, Garrett would have poured out all the secrets of his soul to Taylor.

But he had learned under his father's roof the folly of making himself vulnerable to another person. It was as he had told Taylor: people

respected you more if you were tough, if you showed that you couldn't be pushed around. That was a secret the High Seeker had learned well.

Garrett pressed Taylor harder. "Smith may think that he wants you to follow his orders, but inwardly I'd guess that he's hoping you'll defy him. He needs you to show him the true nature of courting – that he should spurn all that documentwork."

"He *does* like it when I speak boldly to him," Taylor said in a subdued voice. "It puzzled me at first."

"Well, there you are. Go to him tonight and give him what he wants: a partner to match him in boldness and strength."

Taylor contemplated this a while as Garrett nudged the clothes piles with his foot, thinking about all the chores that awaited him before his shift began: delivering his clothes to the communal laundry room, going onto his hands and knees to scrub the floor of his apartment, then taking the long walk down to the communal dining hall, where the food was only half as good as the Seekers' privately delivered food was rumored to be. He wondered whether Taylor had ever done any housework in his life, or whether his concept of labor extended no further than schoolroom sums.

Finally Taylor said, "I'll look up the public records. I would have done that in any case, because Mr. Smith advised me to look at everyone's public records. But beyond that— I think you're right, Garrett. If the High Seeker had given me an official order, that would be different, but if we disagree on personal matters— I think it's part of my friendship to him to tell him when I disagree."

"Of course it is." It wasn't often Taylor acknowledged that Garrett was right. Garrett was feeling amiable enough to add, "While you're visiting the Record-keeper, you should make a copy of your own records."

"Why's that?" Taylor asked in a distant manner, his mind obviously still fixated upon the High Seeker.

"In case they alter your records, of course."

He managed to startle the Seeker out of his thoughts. Taylor stared as he said, "Surely not."

"Taylor." Garrett sought to keep the condescension out of his voice, though it was a struggle. "Think about it. Suppose that you made a mistake in your work, and one of your superiors – a senior Seeker, say – wanted to have you punished. And suppose that your records wouldn't support such a punishment, because you'd been so good at your work. Don't you think the senior Seeker would be tempted to alter your records to make your past seem worst than it was? And it would be so easy to do. That bloody Record-keeper lets everyone see your records, both your friends and your enemies."

"So you made a copy of your records?" Taylor seemed genuinely interested in this tale.

"Of course – and I had the Record-keeper sign each page as proof that it was an official copy. See?"

As he spoke, he rose and took the three strides necessary to reach his bed. He pulled the records from under the mattress and held them out toward the Seeker.

As Taylor reached for them, though, Garrett pulled his hand back. "I can't show them to you, Taylor. You're not trained yet."

Taylor's expression was laughable. The Seeker was quiet a moment before saying, "I think that I'm only forbidden from looking at private communications. I'm permitted to see public records."

"Yes, of course; I'd forgotten." Garrett spoke lightly as he handed over the records.

Taylor took them in his hands but did not open the binder holding them. Instead he said, "Is it safe keeping them here? If the Record-keeper knows you have them, couldn't someone search for them in your quarters?"

It was at times like this that Garrett was proud to claim acquaintance with Taylor. The boy was not the halfwit he sometimes seemed to be; he had a natural mind for conspiracies, though it was untrained. "I've worried about that," Garrett admitted frankly. "I thought of hiding them elsewhere in the dungeon, but I wasn't sure where safety lay." Cocking his head sideways as

he looked at Taylor, he said, "How about your quarters? No one is likely to search a Seeker's cell."

"All right," Taylor said agreeably. "If you really think it's necessary."

"It is," Garrett replied firmly. "You have to take precautions like that, Taylor. People will take advantage of you otherwise."

"The High Seeker said something like that."

Garrett could have laughed. Of course the High Seeker would say that, and of course Taylor would miss the true significance of Smith's remark. Garrett could guess why the High Seeker was playing can't-catch-me with Taylor, and what he hoped to gain by it. Taylor must seem like an easy prize to Smith.

And how wrong the High Seeker was. Garrett, who had come to know Taylor well during the past three months, recognized that the young Seeker was not the easy prize he appeared to be. He was naive, yes, but under that naiveté was a toughness that had drawn Garrett into friendship with him. When the High Seeker discovered the core of what Taylor was, he would be faced with an unpleasant surprise.

And then, Garrett thought with delight, Garrett could have his revenge upon Smith for shaming him in front of Taylor. It made him go hot to think about it – of how Smith had taken Garrett off-guard in his office and made him seem to be a coward before Taylor.

Smith would pay highly for that. As for Taylor – well, it would be a shock for him as well. But it would be the right sort of shock. It was time that the boy grew up and learned how the world really worked.

He was fortunate to have Garrett as his mate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Elsdon sat at a broad table usually covered with stacks of documents that needed to be copied or filed by guards who were assisting the Record-keeper as they awaited the arrival of new prisoners. The documents had been shoved aside in favor of a loosely bound record-book, which Elsdon was leaning over to peruse.

Layle Smith

Legal Records: None prior to 338 (see below). Mr. Smith reports his birthdate as being the 2nd month of 320. Records from 338 onwards found within this folder (see summary below).

Medical Records: None prior to 338 (see below). Records from 338 onwards held in the office of the Eternal Dungeon's Healer.

338 (10th month): Transferred from duties at Blackstone Prison, by recommendation of the Queen's Secretary. No transfer records from Blackstone Prison. Mr. Smith's prior legal records and medical records retained by Blackstone Prison. Mr. Smith awarded title of Torturer-in-Training; training to be supervised by the High Torturer.

339 (1st month): Promoted to title of Torturer.

340 (1st month): Status reviewed by the Codifier, at request of the Queen's Secretary. Satisfactory performance of duties noted.

341 (6th month): Commendation by the High Torturer for performance of duties in the case of Mr. Schrier (see Prisoners' Records).

341 (12th month): Commendation by the High Torturer for performance of duties in the case of Mr. Bidwick (see Prisoners' Records).

342 (3rd month): Eternal Dungeon placed in the custody of Mr. Smith during the High Torturer's illness.

342 (5th month): Commendation by the High Torturer for performance of duties during the High Torturer's illness.

343 (9th month): Selected by the High Torturer to prepare the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*. Placed on half-time to regular duties during preparation.

344 (4th month): Commendation by the Queen for performance of duties during the revision of the *Code of Seeking*.

344 (8th month): Commendation by the United Order of Prisons for work done on the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*.

345 (2nd month): Commendation by the Bi-National Council of the Queendom of Yclau and the Kingdom of Vovim for work done on the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*.

345 (7th month): Recommended by the Codifier to receive the title held by the late Mr. Jenson. Recommendation echoed by the Magisterial Guild. Recommendations accepted by the Queen; Mr. Smith promoted to High Torturer.

345 (9th month): Commendation by the Queen for the decision of the High Seeker (formerly the High Torturer) to change the title held by the torturers of the Eternal Dungeon.

346 (4th month): Commendation by the United Order of Prisons for the High Seeker's assistance in revising the recommended prisoner transfer procedure.

347 (7th month): Commendation by the Queen's Secretary for the High Seeker's assistance in revising the Eternal Dungeon's method of record-keeping.

347 (11th month): Commendation by the Queen for the High Seeker's work in improving relations between the Eternal Dungeon and the Magisterial Guild.

348 (3rd month): Suspended from duties for three months. Records of suspension sealed; apply to the Codifier for permission to view. Recommendation by the Queen's Secretary that the High Seeker be permitted to return to his duties in three months' time, following standard review. Recommendation by the Queen that the High

Seeker retain his title. Recommendations accepted by the Codifier, after consultation with the Magisterial Guild.

348 (6th month): Returned to duties by the Codifier.

349 (6th month): Status reviewed by the Codifier. Satisfactory performance of duties noted. Report sent to the Magisterial Guild and to the Queen.

349 (13th month): Commendation by the United Order of Prisons for assistance in reviewing recommended procedures to the order's member prisons.

The rest of the entries were of the same sort: an unbroken line of commendations for the High Seeker. Frowning with puzzlement, Elsdon flipped through the remaining pages of Layle's records. Amidst the lengthy and effusive praises of Layle Smith, Elsdon found a letter from the Queen's Secretary that referred to Layle's brief period of disgrace, but the letter did no more than to list Layle's past achievements as reason for permitting him to retain his title.

A hand brushed his elbow as the Record-keeper leaned over the table, placing down three more volumes. "Here are the other records you requested, sir," he said in a brisk voice, then turned to berate a guard who was not paying sufficient attention to the document he was copying.

Elsdon looked up quickly, but none of the guards around him were paying any attention to the black-hooded man in their midst; Seekers consulting records were apparently common enough to excite no interest. Indeed, none of the guards had even given him the wide space he knew he would have been granted if he had been consulting the records of a newly arrived prisoner, which were closed to all guards except those who served the Seeker doing the searching. The High Seeker's records, Elsdon guessed, had been well-perused by the guards and the Seekers; the worn pages of the volume attested to that.

He pushed aside Layle's records and set to work examining the next volume in the queue. This did not take him long, for the records were brief and uninformative, but for a single piece of information that piqued his

interest. He opened the second volume, read it quickly, and then opened the third volume cautiously. Though he had half-suspected what he would see there, his breath caught in his throat as he saw the unmistakable black-bordered paper used by the lesser prisons of the queendom of Yclau.

From behind him, a voice said, "Becoming acquainted with my colorful past?"

He jerked round with such swiftness that the guards nearest to him stared with curiosity before returning to their conversation and their work. Mr. Chapman was standing above him, holding a prisoner's records. Though Elsdon could not see his face, there was amusement in the older Seeker's voice as he said, "I've read yours as well."

He reached past Elsdon, glanced at a few of the pages in the volume, then gave a soft snort – apparently still of amusement – and seated himself in the chair next to Elsdon. "My past is less colorful than yours," he told Elsdon. "'Defensive slaying' was the judgment of the magistrate, thanks to the evidence Mr. Smith gave on my behalf. I was released without further imprisonment."

"But you came back to the Eternal Dungeon." Elsdon kept his voice soft, though Mr. Chapman had made no effort to lower his. A few of the younger guards were showing interest in the conversation, but the older guards were apparently well fed on this particular gossip.

Mr. Chapman nodded. "I was working at a tanners' factory at the time; it was labor that brought home money to keep me alive, but it contributed nothing more to the world than that. When I came to this place – where a man's life could be transformed within the space of a few days – I knew that this was where I wanted to work. I applied for a position here as a furnace-stoker, thinking that helping to keep the prisoners alive and comfortable would be heights enough for me, but . . . Well, it was hard to keep from offering to do new services once I was here. So eventually I was hooded."

His voice still held some of the accent of his younger days. Unlike Garrett – who had never acknowledged his background to Elsdon, though Elsdon had easily guessed it – Mr. Chapman apparently felt no shame about his

lower origins. Elsdon said impulsively, "It must be helpful to you in your work."

"To have come from the same class as many of our prisoners, do you mean?" The skin next to Mr. Chapman's eyes crinkled into a smile. "Or perhaps you are referring to my glorious career as a prisoner? I think you'll find that will indeed be helpful to you in your work."

"I hope so." Elsdon glanced at the volumes set aside on the table. "Do many prisoners become Seekers?"

"Not many. You and I are the only ones at present."

"And we were both searched by Mr. Smith."

"Yes." Mr. Chapman's voice grew softer, nearly obscured by the murmur of the guards' voices.

"So were Mr. Partridge and Mr. Zinner."

Guards spoke quietly to one another. The nibs of pens scratched upon the paper. Paper rustled as a guard bound documents into a record-book. The Record-keeper spoke sharply to a guard who was twirling a pencil in a playful manner.

Mr. Chapman finally said, "Yes."

Elsdon waited, but no further information was forthcoming, so he asked, "Did you know them?"

"Not well. Mr. Partridge died of old age several years ago, and Mr. Zinner was only here for five months. He decided to discontinue his training after that. He had not yet taken his oath of eternal commitment, and the Codifier believed that he would not reveal any secrets he had learned during his time here, so he was granted permission to be released into the lighted world. I have heard that he is well on his way now to becoming a magistrate."

"Do you know why he abandoned his training as a Seeker?" Elsdon spoke in barely more than a whisper, though even the younger guards had apparently lost interest in straining their ears to overhear the conversation.

Another lengthy pause ensued before Mr. Chapman said in a flat voice, "His request for release stated that he had personal differences with the High Seeker which would not permit him to work under Mr. Smith. The Codifier would be able to tell you further details . . . if he believed that your interest warranted release of such information."

Elsdon felt his face grow flush under his hood. Ducking his head, he murmured an acknowledgment and pretended that all his concentration was now centered upon arranging the Seekers' records in an orderly stack.

He looked up as a shadow fell over him. Mr. Chapman was standing once more; he said quietly, "I ought not to have disturbed you while you were at your research. I stopped by because I received this note from the High Seeker, and I was wondering whether he had discussed this matter with you."

He handed Elsdon a piece of paper, which was folded in the distinctive triangular manner that Elsdon had been struggling to learn. Elsdon opened the paper, and in the next moment all of his hot embarrassment was washed away in a flood of icy shock. He stared up at Mr. Chapman wordlessly, who took the note back from him. Nodding his farewell, Mr. Chapman turned in time to meet the Record-keeper, who wished to inform him with polite agitation that he was holding the prisoner's records in such a manner that they were likely to slip to the floor and be trampled upon.

o—o—o

The High Seeker was not in his sitting room when Elsdon let himself into the cell with his key. He found Layle seated upon his bed, looking down at a book in his lap, which was titled upwards. So absorbed was the High Seeker in his reading that a minute passed before he noticed Elsdon. Then his startled look was accompanied by a fumbling motion in his hidden lap.

Elsdon had arrived hot with anger, but now, envisioning what he had interrupted, he grinned. "What's that?" he asked, pointing toward the book and speaking in an overly innocent manner. "A book of love poems?"

"Something like that." Layle's voice was as cool as though he were on duty, but he leaned over and pushed the book rapidly under the bed, before Elsdon could see its title. "My apologies for not awaiting you. I'd decided

you weren't coming." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and prepared to rise.

Elsdon, who had come forward in the meantime, dropped Garrett's records to the ground and sat down beside Layle. Layle's breath hissed inward in apparent protest; then his eyes narrowed. "What are you holding behind your back?" he asked.

Elsdon showed him, and the High Seeker's face softened. He reached out to touch the satiny object in Elsdon's hand. "Sweet blood," he said quietly. "I haven't seen one of these since – well, since I arrived at this dungeon seventeen years ago. Where did you get it?"

"From Garrett's love-mate, Chloris," Elsdon said, passing the delicate object into Layle's hand. "It turned up in a shipment of herbs that was delivered to the dungeon kitchens, where she works. She gave it to Garrett and— Well, he's not much of a man for flowers. He gave it to me to do with as I wished."

Layle drew back his hand from the flower. Where he had been stroking the cream-colored petal, there was now a blue mark. "Thank you," he said. "It's lovely." Taking the flower, he leaned over and placed it upon the table next to the bed.

Watching him, Elsdon said, "You ought to put the flower in water at once, or it will die."

"We have a different way of caring for cut flowers where I come from."

Layle began to rise from the bed again, but was arrested as Elsdon abruptly asked, "What's this nonsense about you wanting to transfer my training to Mr. Chapman?"

Despite the firmness of his wording, Elsdon kept his voice quiet and tentative – it was an instinct for him by now, a survival technique he had learned long ago when faced with danger. He wondered, with sudden curiosity, how Layle would react if he acted toward the High Seeker as he had toward the bullies at his school.

Layle was silent a moment, then said, in the same cool voice as before, "It seems appropriate, under the circumstances. I am in danger of losing my

reason when around you, as our last meeting showed, and that could easily lead to me violating the Code when I am in your presence. Mr. Chapman is a well-trained Seeker and has been in the Eternal Dungeon nearly as long as I—"

"No!" cried Elsdon. "Layle, you're the best person in our profession in the world – everyone says that. I don't want to be taught by anyone of lesser skill. I want you as my trainer, and I want you as my love-mate."

Layle went utterly still; his fingers, where they had touched the flower, were wet from its juice. Then he absentmindedly rubbed the juice between his fingers as he said stiffly, "Did you consult Mr. Chapman and read the records I directed you to?"

"I read enough to know that you're the right person for me."

Layle let out his breath heavily. "Then you didn't read enough. Elsdon, we should continue this conversation in the next room—"

"I'm tired of talking," Elsdon said, and reached for Layle's lap.

His hand did not reach its goal. Less than a single drop fell from the water-clock in the corner of the room before Elsdon gasped from the grip of Layle's hand upon his wrist. The High Seeker released his wrist quickly. Layle's eyes had grown as dark as though his face were covered with his hood.

Elsdon's memory of the grasp sent waves of pain through him. He said breathlessly, "When you look like that, I remember you're the High Seeker."

The darkness in Layle's eyes disappeared. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but you very nearly made me lose control of myself. You don't want to do that."

"Yes." Elsdon looked down at his wrist. It was bruised blue now, like the flower, and he felt a wave of sickness go through him. Then he thrust those inappropriate memories away and looked up, saying, "I'm sorry, Layle. But the way you're acting— I know I'm more ignorant than you in matters of love, but even I know that the sort of thing you're asking me to do – consult references and records – just isn't normal. That's not how people

act who have fallen in love; they don't try to do research on each other's backgrounds, as though they were Seekers checking the records of prisoners. They go into the love-bond on the understanding that they both have much to learn about each other, and the bond is the way in which they learn more."

He said nothing about his conversation with Mr. Chapman. He had begun to wonder, since that talk, whether Layle was actually testing him – whether the High Seeker wished to determine if Elsdon was part of the gossip circuit that Layle regarded with such contempt. It did not really matter. For either that reason or the reason Elsdon had stated aloud, consulting Layle's private records was the worst action Elsdon could undertake. It would show a lack of trust in the man who had saved his life.

Despite his background – perhaps *because* of his background – Elsdon was determined to show that he was as capable of trusting Layle as any other man.

Layle stared at the dull grey wall opposite, saying nothing. Remembering his thoughts from earlier, Elsdon said, "I know I have things to learn about you – well, you have things to learn about me as well. You don't know all of me, and I'm damned to the Vovimian hell if I'll give you references and records so that you can research me!"

Layle emitted a touch of a smile then, saying, "Yclau folk don't end up at Vovim's hell."

"Then I won't have to spend an eternity with barbarians – that's a relief. Layle, please . . ."

The High Seeker's smile disappeared. He returned to contemplating the wall, and Elsdon took the opportunity to slip his hand, very slowly this time, into Layle's lap. Layle removed his hand once more, but gently this time, and Elsdon knew without looking at his face that the battle lines were drawn in his mind.

Layle said after a while, "I'm on duty this evening."

"That gives you an entire hour," Elsdon replied in a coaxing manner.

Finally Layle turned his face. It was set so hard that Elsdon could not read the emotions there. The High Seeker said, as though issuing orders, "We kiss. Nothing more than that."

Elsdon let out the breath he had been holding. "Kissing is good," he said agreeably. "I like kissing."

He was sitting very close to Layle, but he waited for the High Seeker to move first. Layle took another look at the wall, which held no object other than the sputtering oil lamp; then he twisted his torso and took Elsdon into his arms.

He did so in a practiced manner, as though lovemaking were as familiar a task to him as torturing, but Elsdon could feel the tension in Layle's arms. Elsdon was tense himself, but for a different reason. He could barely contain his impatience as Layle slowly brought his lips forward.

Being kissed by Layle was a shock as great as the first lash of a beating. Elsdon had not expected that. He was familiar enough with kissing – if not with what followed – and in his dreamings of Layle he had imagined the kisses as a brief and unsatisfying preliminary to what followed. But all of his weeks of dreamings seemed to explode into that single touch of flesh; Elsdon felt as though his bones had disappeared, leaving him as limp as a rag doll. He leaned in toward Layle. The High Seeker took a firmer grip upon him, but the other man's hands were still light – he had not forgotten Elsdon's fear of captivity.

His kiss was gentle too, as soft as the flower petals. Elsdon had thought that a man's kiss would be harder, but he had known girls at school who kissed with greater firmness than Layle was doing. Elsdon opened his eyes, curious to see what Layle's face held.

What he saw was a second whiplash through his body. He pulled himself back abruptly, staring. "What are you doing?" he cried.

Layle did not respond. The blood at his throat beat in a steady manner, and there was no sign upon him that Elsdon's kiss had touched him in any way. His gaze was as cool and detached as though he were searching a prisoner.

"You didn't enjoy that," Elsdon said, as though accusing him of a crime.

Layle was silent a moment before saying in a quiet voice, "I assure you, Elsdon, I enjoyed your kiss very much indeed."

"But not the way I enjoyed yours! You're holding yourself back, like a Seeker holds himself back from a prisoner – you're not letting yourself feel the kiss."

Layle's gaze wandered to the wall, which was entering into shadow as the lamp ate the last of its oil. "I receive enjoyment from your pleasure."

"Layle." It took all of Elsdon's effort to keep his voice soft. Never, outside of the schoolyard, had he come so close to losing his temper for good reason. "I know that you enjoy my pleasure. You're a Seeker – it's in your nature to desire others to receive good. But you've forgotten that I'm a Seeker too. I won't be contented with my own pleasure alone, any more than you would be. I want you to receive pleasure from this as well, or none of this will mean anything to me."

From where he sat, he could see the big blood-vessel travelling up into Layle's neck, and he saw the moment at which it leapt. After a while, Layle said, in a voice barely loud enough to be heard, "I don't think that what you're suggesting would be wise."

"It's what I want." Elsdon allowed firmness to enter his voice. "I want to be your love-mate, Layle. You can't hold yourself back from me forever."

He held his breath for a moment after speaking, wondering whether he was being overly bold. But his firmness was successful: after a minute, Layle nodded to the wall, as though receiving an instruction. Then he turned and took Elsdon into his arms again.

The kiss was different this time. Layle's grip upon him was tighter than before, and his lips pressed hard upon Elsdon's. After a brief interval, his tongue darted between Elsdon's lips, which startled Elsdon – he had never done this to any of the girls he'd kissed, and the girls had either not known enough or not been forward enough to do it to him. For a moment he felt the panic of a virgin being unexpectedly violated. Then he remembered who he was kissing and made himself to relax, enjoying the forcefulness of Layle's tongue as it plunged still deeper into his mouth, probing.

Layle's grip was tightening now, and once more Elsdon fought down alarm. He reminded himself that Layle did not know his ways yet, any more than the girls had the first time he kissed them. He drew back, planning to make clear to Layle his limitations.

In the moment that he did so, Layle turned his head away. It was the old, familiar gesture, but so odd was it in this context that Elsdon, after a moment's hesitation, reached out and turned Layle's face toward his.

He saw blankness.

It was not the coolness of before; it was more opaque than that. Layle's eyes gazed at him unwavering, staring not straight at him, but a little aside, as though he were drawn so deep into himself that a glaze had been plastered over his eyes, cutting out all light. He did not blink.

"Layle?" Elsdon said tentatively.

For a moment more, the High Seeker stared blankly, blindly. Then his eyelids flickered rapidly, as though he were clearing them of some obstruction. His gaze turned after a moment toward Elsdon's eyes.

"Where were you?" Elsdon asked in a hushed voice.

For a few drops of the water-clock, the High Seeker remained silent, like a statue recently woken into life. Finally he said, in a tone that revealed nothing, "Nowhere. Just dreaming."

"Oh, is that all?" Elsdon's voice was light with relief. "I've done that too, when I kissed someone – imagined myself far away, in some exotic location, like a shoal or a dark forest. What were you dreaming of?"

Again Layle was slow to reply. "I was remembering the first day we met."

"Oh." Elsdon's voice went soft as he smiled. "Yes, that was a wonderful day, wasn't it? My heart pounded so much when I first saw you that I felt as though my body would burst. I thought at the time it was from fear, but now I think—"

"Elsdon," the High Seeker cut in. "I have only an hour before my shift. I'd rather not waste it."

Elsdon's smile deepened. "All right. No words, just kisses." And he leaned forward.

But when he drew back a while later, Layle's eyes were once more covered with the glaze, and for the first time, Elsdon felt the grazing touch of uneasiness.

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"But I'm off duty!" cried Garrett.

Weldon Chapman's face was harder than the metal door he leaned upon. "You're on duty until I go off duty," he replied. "Now, deliver the message."

The message had the High Seeker's name scribed upon it. Garrett knew what that meant, and knew that his shift would not end once the message was delivered. "But Chloris is waiting for me," he said, trying to make the Seeker see reason. "I missed my last two meetings with her, and she told me that if I missed another—"

"Mr. Gerson." Chapman rivalled the High Seeker in coldness of voice, but he had a less courteous manner of dealing with guards than Smith did. "I am deeply saddened to learn that the needs of my prisoner have interfered with your love-bond plans. Obviously I have been working you too hard, and it is time you took a break from your duties. I suggest that you go to the Record-keeper and tell him that you wish to be suspended from your work for a month."

A suspension meant no pay, and a black mark upon his record. Not caring whether his hard-hearted Seeker heard, Garrett uttered a curse against the whole Eternal Dungeon and swung on the ball of his foot, heading in the direction of the lettered rooms.

Once out of sight of Chapman, though, he slowed. The end of the corridor he was travelling through led, not only to the lettered rooms, but to the back entrance to the corridor between the inner and outer dungeon. That entrance was used only by Seekers or by guards undertaking urgent business on behalf of Seekers. He knew the guards on duty at the entrance;

he should have no trouble getting past them, and from there it was not far to his apartment. He could meet Chloris and—

Tell her what? That he had to break his promise to her again, because a work-happy Seeker had told him to do so? What kind of man would she consider him then? He frowned, contemplating the problem.

And then a thought came to him, straying into his mind like a gift of good fortune. Of course – it would be so simple. Satisfied, Garrett moved toward the entrance door, congratulating himself on his foresight. He had known that the day would come when all the pains he took to befriend a Seeker paid off.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Why are you doing this?" Elsdon whispered.

There was no reply. He felt the hand touch his legs, then brush his ankles. The rope around his ankles burned into his flesh as it tightened. Elsdon, his face turned toward the bedroom ceiling, tried to concentrate his thoughts on each rising breath. It was hard, though; even his chest was constricted, now that his wrists and ankles had been bound to opposite ends of the bedstead. He tried flexing his hands – which were bound together – and found that his fingers were already numb.

"Too tight?" said the gentle voice.

"Yes," he whispered.

He heard rather than saw the figure in the dark room as it moved to the head of the bed. A finger slipped between Elsdon's wrists and the bond. Apparently judging that Elsdon's assessment was correct, his captor slackened the knot somewhat.

The adjustment left Elsdon little better off than he was before. "Why?" he asked again, his voice raw with unspoken sobs. "Just tell me what I've done wrong, and I won't do it again."

His captor made no reply except to brush Elsdon's hair back from his eyes, very softly. "Do you want the gag?" he asked in a quiet voice.

For a moment, Elsdon did not speak; he was trying to judge what lay within his raw throat. Then he jerked his head once in a nod.

A moment later, his captor had placed a knotted handkerchief into his mouth. The taste of the cloth was bitter and dry. As he raised Elsdon's head to tie the handkerchief in the back, his captor said, "It's good that you cooperate. That's good. You know I'm doing this in your best interests. If you cooperate, it will be easier for you."

Elsdon could not have replied now if he wished; nor could he call out to the footsteps he heard outside the door. He tried to swallow, but the gag was absorbing all the liquid in his mouth.

The hand brushed his hair once more. "I'll check on you in the middle of the night," the quiet voice said, "and at dawn I'll come back again. And then . . . Well, we'll see. Perhaps the binding will be enough to help you." He pulled up the covers to the top of Elsdon's chest, then leaned forward and kissed his forehead lightly. "Good night, son."

When he had left, Elsdon tried to turn his thoughts to sleep, but he knew that it was of no use. He could never sleep, not on the nights when his father bound him like this. Just the very slight pain in his ankles and wrists was enough to wake him with a jerk whenever he started to drop off.

He could feel his midriff begin to itch, but he could do nothing about it. Eight hours until he could scratch it – maybe four hours if his father was willing to scratch it for him. He would do that sometimes. Elsdon knew that his father did not wish him to be any more uncomfortable than was necessary for his punishment. If only he knew what the punishment was for – if only he could change whatever it was that his father, in his loving manner, was trying to change.

Another servant passed the room, but thanks to his father's gift of the gag, the servant would not discover him – would not learn of his shame.

His left shoulder-blade, drawn upward by the position of his arms, was digging into a lump in the mattress. He tried to squirm away from the lump, but it was no use. His shoulder-blade would continue to be pressed that way for the next eight hours.

Eight hours. He could hear the water-clock in the corner of the room, dripping one slow drop at a time: one . . . two . . . three . . . He began to count backwards the time remaining: twenty-eight thousand eight hundred, twenty-eight thousand seven hundred and ninety-nine, twenty-eight thousand seven hundred and ninety-eight . . . The scream was building in his throat. Twenty-eight thousand seven hundred and ninety-seven—

A crash jolted him into wakefulness. For a moment, all he could hear was the water dripping in the corner, one drop at a time. Then the crash came again.

He scrambled out of the bed. He had just enough wakefulness to remember to pull on his trousers and place his hood over his head as he stumbled

forward. Then he was fumbling for the latch in the dim light of the single lamp that still lit the sitting room of the cell.

Garrett stood in the doorway. He was dressed in his grey uniform, but his hair was all awry, as though he had been running; a trickle of sweat made its way down his throat. He opened his mouth to speak, then looked down at Elsdon's bare chest. His mouth twitched into a grin. "Well, well, well," he said. "So the High Seeker knows how to use his dagger."

The sickness left over from Elsdon's nightmare was replaced in an instant by the coldness of embarrassment. He said, "The High Seeker is at work right now. He said I could sleep here while he was gone."

"And I'm sure he lets all his Seekers sleep in his bed." Garrett stepped into the cell and closed the door to the inner dungeon; then, in that careless manner of his, he flipped Elsdon's face-cloth up. "Say, do you know where he's working tonight? I have a message for him."

Elsdon noticed for the first time the paper in Garrett's hand that was folded into a triangle, then folded again so that its tip could be tucked into its base. "He didn't mention which cell he's working in," Elsdon replied. "Couldn't you ask the Record-keeper?"

Garrett sniffed. "I could if I thought he'd answer. Aaron hasn't spoken to me all week, not since I blotted a line in one of my reports, or some other such death-sentence crime."

"He has to answer questions that pertain to your duty. You should report him to the Codifier."

Garrett sniffed again. "Since when did higher-ups here follow the Code if it didn't suit them? Taylor, you have much to learn."

His voice held a mixture of amusement and condescension that made Elsdon's back tingle. But all that Elsdon said was, "The Record-keeper's tablet should tell where the High Seeker is tonight—"

"Listen, I don't have time for this," Garrett said swiftly. "Chapman wants me back right away – he's at a vital point in the searching. You give this to the High Seeker when you see him next." He flipped the message into Elsdon's hands.

Elsdon stared down at the paper. "But he might need to see this right away. Besides—"

"Then go find him and give it to him; I'll come back in an hour and see whether there's a reply. See you, Seeker!" And before Elsdon could say a word, Garrett had pulled open the door to the outer dungeon and was running down the corridor.

By the time that Elsdon was able to pull down the flap of his hood and step into the corridor, Garrett was out of sight. Elsdon sighed, looking down again at the message. He had been about to remind his friend that, being in training, he was not authorized to carry Seekers' messages. For a moment, he was tempted to leave the message under the door leading to the inner dungeon and pretend he knew nothing about it.

But the message might be urgent, and a prisoner's welfare might depend on the answer. He closed the door to the outer dungeon, reflecting to himself that Garrett had been in such a frenzy that he had not noticed he was running in the wrong direction.

A few minutes later, fully clothed in black uniform and boots, he made his way into the entry hall. He was not noticed. A newly arrived prisoner had decided that this was his last chance to escape the dungeon alive; he was desperately trying to break away toward the passage leading to the lighted world, and six guards were in the midst of trying to subdue him. Nearby, the Record-keeper sat, calmly sorting the prisoner's records.

Elsdon looked at the scuffle for a moment, hesitating, but nobody in the entry hall noticed him amidst the emergency. So, after a moment, he slipped behind Mr. Aaron and looked at the great tablet there. His eye lingered momentarily on the High Seeker's name at the top of the tablet – "Layle Smith – 1, A" – and then travelled down to the names below. For a minute, he scanned the columns, trying to remember the name of Layle's present prisoner. Then his eye caught sight of four lines at the bottom of the tablet, separate from the rest. The first of these lines read, "Layle Smith – A."

His breath caught in his throat until he remembered that the lettered rooms, unlike the breaking cells, were labelled with the names of the Seekers making use of them. His gaze lingered upon the words before him;

then he turned to look at the guards hidden at the dusky edges of the entry hall. Any of them were authorized to carry messages—

—but if he asked any of them to carry a message to the High Seeker, they would want to know who had given him the message. Sighing again, he slipped through the doorway to the inner dungeon.

The shouts of the new prisoner faded away, leaving silence. Elsdon's boots tapped against the flagstoned floor, and his body cast a shadow that grew long and then shrank and then grew long again as he passed the oil lamps on the walls. The corridor was thick with the smell of smoke, though the ventilation shafts above carried most of the smoke away to the lighted world, far above. It was a familiar smell; the corridor always reminded him of his school. Even the doors he passed might have been doors into classrooms. Only a few of them were guarded, and the guards took no notice of him as he passed.

He reached a point where the corridor narrowed. He paused, straining his ear for new sounds, but none could be heard. The corridor grew dimmer, too, for no lamps lit this area; the only light came from further back. Four doors lay here, all in a row, and at the first door stood a guard.

With a feeling of descending heart, Elsdon realized that the guard was not the High Seeker's senior night guard, Mr. Sobel. Layle's junior night guard had never forgiven Elsdon for their initial encounter, which had earned Mr. Urman a reprimand from the High Seeker.

Trying to pull forth all of his dignity as a Seeker, Elsdon went up to the guard and said, "I have a message for you to deliver to the High Seeker."

His attempt at authority failed. Mr. Urman glanced at the paper and said, "I'm in training, sir; I'm not authorized to carry messages."

He did not say, though his face did, that Elsdon was not authorized either. Elsdon looked at the door. It was black in the shadows, and no sound came through it.

"Well . . ." He decided abruptly that what was needed here was not authority but supplication. Changing his voice to that which he had once

used with his father, he said, "I really don't know how to do this. What's the proper procedure?"

For a moment, Mr. Urman remained stiff at his post. Then a melting took place in his body, and his expression softened.

"It's not hard," he said, in the sort of voice he might have used to another guard who had less training. "You just need to remain quiet when you enter. The prisoner won't be able to see you, so you mustn't cough or do anything else that would make him aware of your presence. Wait until the High Seeker has a moment to spare you, and then give him the message and wait to see whether he gives you a reply. I'll be watching and will let you out then, without need for you to knock."

Elsdon nodded, and Mr. Urman turned, peered briefly through the pinprick of the watch-hole, and said softly, "It's all right to enter now. Be sure not to make any noise."

He opened the door, and the sounds of torture emerged.

They were faint, as far as matters in a dungeon were likely to go: the slight creaking of a machine as it moved, accompanied by gasps and groans. Nor was the scene in the room as bad as any of the scare-tales that Elsdon had heard about the Eternal Dungeon when he was a boy. As Mr. Urman closed the door noiselessly behind him, Elsdon took a swift look at the room and ascertained that little had changed since he had been there last.

The most prominent figure in the room was Mr. Sobel, who stood like a captain at the helm, manning the great wheel that controlled the rack. His head was bowed to look downward at the rack. Elsdon could not see the man there: he was entirely hidden by Mr. Sobel's body and the wheel. But he could see the black-hooded Seeker in the room; like Mr. Sobel, his head was bowed to look down, though his eyes were in view to Elsdon. They were cool, as they had been upon his first meeting with Elsdon.

He was standing halfway down the room, leaning upon the wall in a relaxed manner as his hand lightly brushed the Swelling Globe. "You know that this is in your best interests, Mr. Parris," he said. "Things would go considerably easier for you if you were to cooperate."

The hidden prisoner gave a muffled curse, followed by a sharp gasp. Elsdon flinched, but there was no change in the High Seeker's expression as he said, "Mr. Parris, I don't think you understand the dangerousness of your position. The scale on this rack runs from zero to ten – once the prisoner has reached eight on the scale, I can no longer guarantee that he will have future use of his body. Are you really sure that you wish me to order Mr. Sobel to take you to nine?" He leaned forward and added with intensity, "It need not be this way between us. Truth is always the best path in life."

"Truth!" The man sounded as though he spoke with a heavy weight on his chest. "Truth means nothing to you. You say—" He gave another gasp and concluded rapidly, "You say this is for me, but it's for you. I can see that you're enjoying this."

For a long moment, the High Seeker continued to look down upon the prisoner in a detached manner. He still had not looked up to where Elsdon stood by the door, nor even at the guard standing motionless at the head of the rack. Then a change came to his expression: the skin next to his eyes wrinkled.

Elsdon felt the coldness of the room enter his depths.

When the High Seeker finally spoke, the smile was in his voice as well. "You speak as though you were making a great revelation, Mr. Parris." His voice was light with mockery. "Have you never heard the tales about me?"

From the prisoner's swift response, it was clear that he had. "Don't – don't you touch me!" he said in a strangled voice. "I'll tell your Codifier!"

"Mr. Sobel." The High Seeker kept his gaze fixed upon the prisoner. "Mr. Parris wishes to speak with the Codifier. Will you make the arrangements, please?"

"Yes, sir." The guard's voice was colorless.

The High Seeker leaned forward yet further; his hand was now on the rack. The smile had not left his eyes. Through the renewed moans of the prisoner, he said softly, "You are welcome to discuss this matter with the Codifier, Mr. Parris, but do you truly believe that you will be telling him

anything he doesn't already know? I have worked in this dungeon for seventeen years; I've never made any secret of my predilections. The Eternal Dungeon finds it . . . useful to have someone of my sort breaking the prisoners."

The prisoner emitted a sound from the back of his throat that soared, like the whine of a cornered beast. The smile deepened in the High Seeker's voice as he said, "I work here on condition that I keep the Code, Mr. Parris. You are in no danger from me." Even as he spoke, his hand slid further forward, belying his words. "The issue you face is simply whether you will truthfully answer the question I have asked you – or whether you would prefer to increase my pleasure. I admit," he said lightly, "that I have mixed emotions over what sort of response I wish you to give."

The prisoner made no reply, though the whine in his throat continued. Mr. Sobel was as immobile at his post as though he had turned into a corpse. The High Seeker leaned so far forward that he was now nearly spread upon the rack, and upon the man who lay there. He said, quite softly, "Where were you on the night of the murder?"

"With my brother until—"

"Take him up." For the first time, the High Seeker flicked a glance at the guard.

"No!" The prisoner's voice transformed to a scream as the guard pushed the wheel, clicking forward to the next notch. The High Seeker had straightened to watch; the smile in his eyes had turned to joy. As the prisoner's scream broke into a racking cough, the High Seeker said, in the voice of a man deeply satisfied, "Thank you, Mr. Parris. I appreciate your consideration of my welfare."

The prisoner's coughs rose into another scream. The High Seeker took no notice, moving past the rack and past the guard, walking in the direction of the door. And it was then that Elsdon, standing with sweat chilling his body, knew that the High Seeker had been aware of his presence all along.

Elsdon remained as immobile as the guard, unable to move any muscle as the High Seeker came forward. He could not even lift his eyes above the High Seeker's waist. He was seeing what the prisoner had seen: the

evidence that Layle Smith's words had not been an artfully crafted lie. Elsdon closed his eyes.

The High Seeker stopped before him, and he felt the message being removed from his hand. When he opened his eyes a minute later, Elsdon saw that Layle Smith was turned toward the wall, using a pencil to scribble something upon the message. Then he refolded the paper and turned, handing it to Elsdon.

There was no smile in his eyes now, only the same chill darkness that Elsdon had known when he was the High Seeker's prisoner. For a moment, the High Seeker kept Elsdon's gaze captive. Then he turned and walked back toward the rack, saying, "Now, Mr. Parris, will you begin to tell me the truth, or will you give me the opportunity to increase my pleasure yet further?"

He reached the rack, and his hand went out toward the prisoner.

Elsdon's skin prickled as he felt a hand tug at his sleeve. He turned to see that Mr. Urman was holding the door open for him. Elsdon stumbled into the darkness of the corridor, and then, as the guard turned to close the door, he hurried down the corridor, in the direction of the breaking cells.

His hand fumbled as he brought out the master key from his hidden pocket and used it to open the first door he reached. The cell was black; apparently, the cell being in disuse at the moment, the furnace had not been lit this far down in the dungeon. Leaving the door open behind him, he half-ran, half-stumbled his way to the corner of the cell. He was just in time to reach the chamber-pot there before he fell to his knees and began to vomit.

Behind him, the abandoned door pivoted on its hinges and slammed shut, leaving him in darkness.

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When the door opened again finally, he was awash with sweat and was shaking from sobs and muffled screams.

He did not hear the new arrival until a hand touched him. He flinched and felt his body racked with trembling again. The hand touched the back of

his head, the fingers gently curling into his hair. Then the blindfold fell off, and he could see his father.

Auburn Taylor was standing beside the bed, holding his belt in his hand. "Why?" Elsdon tried to say. "Please tell me why!" But the gag was still within his mouth.

"This is for your own good, son," his father said softly. "You must believe me." His face held the look it always did, of a man driven to a hard duty by necessity. He pulled down the covers, went to the bottom of the bed, and released Elsdon's ankles from the bedpost. Then he carefully pushed Elsdon onto his stomach and pulled his trousers down.

Elsdon's body already ached from the hours of thrashing and tugging at his bonds; he thought nothing worse could hurt. But as always, he was wrong: as the belt hit his naked backside, the leather seemed to dig down to his bones, and he desperately burrowed his face into the mattress, knowing that his shrieks were so loud that they were penetrating the barrier of his gag. *Sweet blood, no,* he thought. *Don't let them hear. Don't let the servants know of my disgrace . . .*

"Mr. Taylor?" The voice spoke from the doorway, and Elsdon's scream ended in a choke. Sweat turn cold upon him as he tried to gain the courage to look back to see which servant had witnessed his ignominy.

"Mr. Taylor?" The voice came again, and this time Elsdon realized that his father was not the one being addressed.

He opened his eyes slowly. Mr. Urman stood in the corridor, his hand upon the latch as he held the cell door open a crack. "Are you all right, sir?" he asked.

Elsdon scrambled to his knees. His body was slick with sweat. He moved to the door and then through the doorway in an automatic manner. Only once he was in the corridor did he look down the emptiness of the darkness ahead and realize that the young guard had abandoned his post for Elsdon's sake.

Quickly Elsdon moved back to stand beside the door to Rack Room A, trying to ignore the tugging at his heels to flee. "I—" He stopped, not

knowing what to say.

"It's hard the first time." All of Mr. Urman's former disdain had left. "Or so I hear – I haven't witnessed Mr. Smith close-hand at work yet. But Mr. Sobel says that being in the rack room is the worst part of his work."

He did not want to think about Mr. Sobel yet. "What do I do now?" he asked, expecting no answer.

But Mr. Urman misunderstood him and said, "If there's a reply, sir, you take it back to the Seeker who sent the message. Do you know who that is?"

"Yes, I—" He looked down at the folded paper and remembered the guards' penchant for carrying one another's messages. He could not be certain that Garrett was the initial messenger. "No," he told Mr. Urman. "I'm not sure."

Mr. Urman chewed on his lip a moment before saying, "Well, then, you'll have to check the message to see. Open it up— No, don't show it to me, sir. Just read the name there and tell me what it is."

He looked down at the page.

> My prisoner has broken the Code once more. Request use of the rack, in accordance with our conversation yesterday. —W. Chapman
>
> Permission granted, provided that you do not take him above level three. I'll discuss the matter with you before your next shift. —L.S.

He looked up to where Mr. Urman was watching him. The guard's hand was resting upon his dagger, as though he were in the presence of danger. "It's from Mr. Chapman," Elsdon said.

Mr. Urman nodded. "He's in Breaking Cell 4. It's near the entry hall—"

"I remember where it is."

He saw Mr. Urman's face change as the guard recalled how Elsdon had gained this knowledge. "Yes," said Mr. Urman. "Well. You don't have to go

into the cell. Mr. Chapman's guards are fully trained, so just hand the message to them."

The tapping of Elsdon's bootsteps was hollow against the corridor walls as he made his way back. He felt like a snail pulled from its shell, shrivelling in the harsh exterior world. As he reached the door of the cell he remembered so well, his feet had begun to drag.

He could hear the faint sound of Mr. Chapman's voice from within the cell, but no one was guarding the door. He knew what that meant. He stood for a moment, indecisive, the letter crumpled within his tightening fist. Then he pulled from his shirt the master key.

No one noticed him as he entered. Mr. Chapman's eyes were intent upon the prisoner, the prisoner's face was pressed against the wall, and Mr. Chapman's senior-most guard, Mr. Boyd, was in the process of bringing his whip down upon the prisoner's naked back.

The prisoner gave a sharp cry and pressed himself harder against the wall, pulling himself toward the bound hands above his head, as though he might thereby escape the next blow. His head was turned toward Mr. Chapman, but his eyes were closed, and already tears were beginning to trail down his face. Upon his back lay a series of red, angry welts.

In the next moment, Mr. Chapman saw him. The Seeker held up his hand to the guard, who was drawing back his arm in preparation for the next lash. Mr. Chapman murmured something to the prisoner and turned away, walking toward the cell door.

He took Elsdon by the arm. His grip was so tight that, under ordinary circumstances, Elsdon would have screamed, but now he felt emptied of all energy and warmth; his body was so cold that he was beginning to shake. He let the other Seeker steer him out of the cell and into the dim quietness of the corridor.

The corridor was cooler than the cell had been. He pressed his body against the chill plaster, sucking in great gulps of air, as the older Seeker watched him.

When it became clear that he would not sink to the floor, Mr. Chapman said in a hard voice, "What is the meaning for your entrance, Mr. Taylor? You are not yet authorized to enter a breaking cell while it is in use."

Wordlessly, Elsdon held out the note. Mr. Chapman took the letter, glanced at the name written on its exterior, and narrowed his eyes. "Did Mr. Gerson give that to you?"

Elsdon was concentrating all his efforts on combatting the waves of dizziness that shuddered through him, like wavering heat from a flame. He had barely enough thought left in him to nod. Mr. Chapman gazed at the note for a long moment before opening it. Then his body grew still.

He looked up and said quietly, "You delivered this directly to the High Seeker?"

Elsdon nodded again. He was wishing that the corridor would stay still rather than rock beneath his feet. He clutched at the wall harder, closing his eyes.

"Mr. Boyd." Mr. Chapman's sharp voice caused Elsdon to jerk his eyelids open. He turned his head to see that Mr. Boyd was in the process of locking the cell door. The Seeker said to his guard, "Go to Mr. Bergsen and tell him that Mr. Taylor has immediate need of his services."

The guard, without waiting, plunged down the corridor in the direction of the rack rooms. Mr. Chapman took Elsdon lightly by the elbow. After glancing around for a moment, he led Elsdon to the cell opposite, opening it with his key.

This cell, though empty, was furnace-lit; flames leapt behind the wall of glass blocks at the far end. Instinctively Elsdon, seeking warmth, went to that end. But it made no difference; his body was cold through and through, and he could not stop the shaking. He tried rubbing his hands together. As he did so, he felt a sharp pain upon his wrist. He looked down and saw the blue bruise there.

"You'd best sit down," Mr. Chapman advised.

Elsdon had been trying to determine whether to fall to his knees and be sick. Mr. Chapman's voice caused him to lift his head. He stared at the

hooded Seeker blankly before saying, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't *anyone* tell me?"

For a moment Mr. Chapman was silent. Then, for the first time in Elsdon's presence, he lifted the face-cloth of his hood. The face behind the mask was gentler than the voice, and he had lines of age criss-crossing his face. It was the face of a middle-aged laborer, careful in his duties, but worn down by his work. He let out his breath slowly as he said, "There is too much gossip in this dungeon. No doubt I and others here went to the other extreme."

Elsdon fumbled with his own hood, knowing that he should match the Seeker's gracious gesture. He stopped suddenly and felt the chillness in his body once more. "Your prisoner," he said. "You left your prisoner alone."

"We had only just begun the punishment. He will keep for a few minutes more."

"But he's unguarded! If you leave him alone, the High Seeker could find him, and if he does—"

His voice hit a choke and fell, stunned. Behind Mr. Chapman, the door to the cell had opened, and the High Seeker stood there.

He looked as neat and unruffled as he had when he had left his bedroom earlier that night. His clothes were not mussed, and his voice was even as he said, "Mr. Chapman, your prisoner is untended."

The other Seeker pulled down his hood swiftly and turned to face the High Seeker, saying, "I realize that, sir. I'm afraid that I'm short of a guard at the moment." For the first time, bitterness appeared in his voice. Then he said in a more formal manner, "Mr. Taylor is ill. I have sent for the healer—"

"So Mr. Boyd told me when I met him." The coolness in Layle Smith's voice was like a winter wind. "I will stay with Mr. Taylor until the healer arrives. Please return to your prisoner."

Mr. Chapman glanced at Elsdon, standing cold-skinned at the end of the cell; then the Seeker nodded and slipped past the High Seeker. Not until the door was closed again did Elsdon open his mouth to call him back. He

was cut off by the High Seeker's swift remark, "You need not speak, Mr. Taylor. The healer will be here soon."

The levelness of his voice brought a new emotion to Elsdon. The floor ceased to sway, and he felt the blood building up its beat within him. "You enjoyed it," he said in an incredulous voice.

The High Seeker made no reply. Elsdon repeated, "You enjoyed it! You enjoyed racking your prisoner!"

For a moment more, the High Seeker was silent, as though Elsdon's words had not touched him. Then he said softly, "We all enjoy our work in some fashion, or we would not choose to become Seekers."

The wild beating of Elsdon's blood resolved itself into a hard war-drum. With a thick voice, Elsdon said, "Are you telling me that every Seeker goes cock-high when he racks a prisoner?"

Another pause, and then: "No," said the High Seeker in his chill darkness.

The silence stretched between them. The High Seeker remained next to the door, blocking Elsdon's exit. His pose was stiff and formal, and he had not raised his hood. After a while he said, still quiet, "I did advise you to consult my records—"

"No! Don't send me to records or to other people to give me answers – tell me yourself. Why were you suspended from your duties?"

When the High Seeker spoke again, his voice was colder than Elsdon's body had been. "I raped a bound prisoner."

The flames behind Elsdon leapt. A single drop of sweat chased its way down his spine, tickling him in a place between his shoulder-blades that was difficult to scratch. He did not move.

The High Seeker said, in a voice so quiet that it barely reached Elsdon, "I will arrange for you to be transferred into Mr. Chapman's care."

"You do that." Elsdon's voice shook. He walked forward, heedless now of the consequences, but the High Seeker made no move to stop him; he stepped away, allowing Elsdon to fling open the cell door.

Elsdon was on the point of stepping through the doorway when he whirled around and said to the hooded man, "Tell me one thing more. When you kissed me a few hours ago, what were you dreaming of?"

When he finally spoke, the High Seeker's voice was frost upon the skin. "I was dreaming of the day we met. I was remembering you stripped half-naked, being beaten upon my orders."

It took Elsdon a moment to pull enough air into his lungs to speak. When he spoke, it was in a voice that was half a sob. "If you come near me again, I'll kill you."

The High Seeker did not reply. Elsdon took hold of the cell door, and in a movement that sent reverberations down the corridor and caused the guards there to jerk round and stare, he slammed the cell door shut upon his captor.

CHAPTER SIX

"I should have known!" cried the Seeker-in-Training. "From the moment I saw the public records, I should have known!"

He paced up and down the narrow cell, his body backlit by the glass blocks that reflected the flames of the furnace beyond. His eyes were unseeing, focussed upon something beyond the cell.

"It was all there in the records, plain to my sight. The High Seeker had had three love-mates; all three men had been his prisoner. And I – I can just imagine what he would have done to me if I'd let it continue." He stood still a moment, breathing heavily as though he had been running from danger, then resumed his frenzied pacing. "I won't let him do that to me. Not again. I won't let him hurt me, nor will I let him hurt the other prisoners. I oughtn't to have left him in the racking room – I ought to have protected the prisoner against him. I took an oath to help the prisoners, and I broke it by running away. I won't do that again. It's the prisoners who matter most."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Garrett commented dryly. "I was beginning to wonder whether you'd remembered."

It was small satisfaction to see the young Seeker turn with pale guilt toward him. Garrett had seated himself on the bench of his breaking cell; he knew well the long hours of standing that awaited him, and he had no desire to expend energy before then. Certainly not for this man.

Taylor said in a soft voice, "I'm sorry, Garrett. It was wrong of me to tell Mr. Chapman what you had done. I was just— Well, I was close to losing my mind after what I saw."

It was a temptation – oh, so sweet a temptation – to break Taylor with a full reminder of all he had done, to point out to him that, if he had only heeded Garrett's warnings, he would not have been such a fool as to strip himself of what little power protected him against the Eternal Dungeon's dark High Seeker. In the wake of Taylor's betrayal of him, Garrett relished a vision of Taylor agonizing from the awareness of what idiocy he had committed with the High Seeker.

But Garrett could not afford to indulge himself that way. None of his so-named friends had visited him since his arrest; Taylor was his only contact with the world outside this cell. He needed Taylor, for a while longer at least.

So he said, "I can understand what a shock it must have been for you to learn the truth. And of course you're right that it's your duty to help the prisoners. I could aid you with that if I were free."

He thought it was clever of himself to put it that way – not to appeal to Taylor's charitable instincts by begging for help, but rather to suggest that they were partners in a joint enterprise. He had a momentary vision of Taylor marching up to the Codifier and demanding his release.

It appeared, though, that Taylor's visions were not as grand as Garrett's. He said nothing, but simply looked unhappy.

Garrett sighed and scaled down his plans to fit Taylor's narrow view of life. "You've already been of help," he said, continuing to try to keep the Seeker sweet. "Thanks to you, my records are safe. I've no doubt that the High Seeker's bully-boys searched my quarters for my copy of the records after they arrested me."

Taylor turned away from the fiery wall. Even with the shadows deep upon his face, his look of misery was stark.

"Oh, no," said Garrett slowly. "Bloody blades, no. Tell me you didn't do it, Taylor. Tell me you didn't give Smith my copy of the records."

"I didn't give it to him," Taylor replied, his voice drowned in wretchedness. "I left it on the floor of his bedroom."

So grave was this calamity that, for once, Garrett could not think of the proper biting response. He simply looked at Taylor, and waited for him to wither into ashes.

"I'll get it back," Taylor said hastily. "Maybe Mr. Sobel can retrieve it for me—"

"Sobel!" Garrett's remaining calm blew, like a poorly tended furnace fire. "You ditch-born son of a mare! What sort of fucking brains did your dad

leave you with after he beat you? Enough to figure out the earnings from a wager? What makes your dung-filled mind think that you can trust Sobel?"

By the time Garrett had finished with this bit of street invective, Taylor had turned as white as a newly lashed welt, and Garrett wondered whether the Seeker would simply walk out of the cell. But it seemed that Taylor's mind was on higher matters than Garrett's low talk. After a moment he said in a husky voice, "He was there. In the rack room. He heard the High Seeker threaten to rape the prisoner, and he did nothing. He even raised the rack to nine – to nine! The High Seeker told me that prisoners are rarely taken above three, yet Mr. Smith was prepared to tear a prisoner's body apart for his own pleasure. And Mr. Sobel stood by and did nothing."

It occurred to Garrett, belatedly, that Taylor had not yet been trained for the rack room, and that he had therefore received a distorted picture of what had taken place. Well, it was all to Garrett's advantage. He pressed further, saying, "It's not just Sobel. They all know about the High Seeker, from the junior guards on up to the Codifier."

"The Codifier?" Taylor was now as pale as a prisoner facing the rack.

"Of course! You said that the Codifier gave Smith only three months' suspension for his infraction. And now you know that Smith raped a prisoner—"

"—which is a death-sentence crime. Oh, sweet blood." Taylor's voice sounded as if a hangman were wringing his neck. He pressed his fists against his lips, as though trying to keep back bile. He whispered, "Everyone here is like my father. Everyone. And they fooled me into thinking they cared about the prisoners."

Garrett started to speak, but decided to let Taylor have time to adjust his eyes to the darkness he had entered. Garrett could not remember the day he himself had realized the world was nothing more than a prison of pain and injustice – his own awakening was too far back. But he had resented Taylor's innocence, and it was a pleasure to see it broken. In a world where men gambled away their sons' inheritances, why should a Seeker-in-Training remain oblivious to the truth? Really, Garrett decided, he was giving Taylor the greatest gift the Seeker would ever receive.

He had just opened his mouth to point this out when Taylor said, with surprising firmness, "The Code isn't corrupt. The High Seeker uses it as a tool to cover his evil deeds, but the tool is sharper than he has guessed – the *Code of Seeking* is a work of purity, unlike its maker. It could protect the prisoners, if the right men were using it. Perhaps I can persuade some of the junior Seekers and guards to join me in making this dungeon the place it ought to be."

"You'll never succeed in that," Garrett said hastily. "You'd be better off leaving this place, before the High Seeker finds a way to destroy you."

"I'm oath-bound to remain here," Taylor said; he was beginning to pace again. "Besides, I won't hide from what's happening. Not again. This time I'll fight back."

Garrett sighed. His newest plan had been a simple one: persuade Taylor to escape the dungeon and cross the queendom's borders, taking Garrett with him. But of course the boy would needlessly complicate matters with his high ideals. He was still living in his pretty world where evil torture-gods could be defeated and gambling fathers could be persuaded to come home to their families.

"I must go," Taylor said unexpectedly. "I must think of ways to fight the High Seeker."

"He won't fight you back directly," Garrett warned him. "He'll do the same to you as he plans to do to me: he'll tarnish your reputation."

Taylor took no notice of this clear hint about the missing records. "I'll visit you tomorrow," the Seeker-in-Training said with absent mind. "At least, I'll try to. It depends on whether I'll be busy working against the High Seeker."

Before Garrett could think of anything to say, the young Seeker strode to the door of the cell, gave an authoritative rap there, and was allowed exit by the guards.

Garrett sighed and pulled the blankets of his bed-shelf around his shoulders. He ought to have known that Taylor would be of no use to him

when crisis came. That was the way people were: when you needed them most, they failed you.

o—o—o

The day guards let Elsdon out of the breaking cell. He had taken care that his visit should occur at daytime; he had no desire to speak yet with Mr. Sobel. Besides, come eventide, the High Seeker would be stalking his prey.

He shivered in the coolness of the corridor and turned his eyes away from the darkness at the far end. Layle Smith's day guards were still watching him, curiosity evident in their expressions as they secured the door. Elsdon opened his mouth to offer some reassuring, Seekerly remark. And then his heart descended. Walking down the corridor, flanked by his night guards, was the High Seeker.

Elsdon stood his ground, though his heart was louder than the steady thud of the High Seeker's bootsteps on the floor. To Elsdon's relief, Layle Smith stopped outside of reach. He said, in his usual formal manner, "Mr. Taylor, I am sorry that you were not informed, as you ought to have been. Mr. Gerson is not permitted personal visits."

"Yes," said Elsdon, "I'm sure that's what you want."

The dungeon was still, but for the faint sound of a prisoner sobbing nearby. Guards stood at duty outside many of the cell doors; several had their heads turned to look toward the High Seeker. Elsdon guessed that Mr. Urman had spread the tale of how Elsdon had reacted after witnessing the High Seeker at work in the rack room.

The High Seeker was motionless, like a spider waiting at the center of his web.

"Look," said Elsdon, his voice suddenly rough with anger. "I know what you're doing – I know that everything you do depends on secrecy. You'll convince the prisoners that this is for their own good, or if not, you'll find a way to keep them from spreading the news of what you do. Well, it won't work in this case. If you don't permit Mr. Gerson to see visitors, then I'll complain to the Codifier; and if the Codifier won't listen to me, I'll alert the magistrates; and if the magistrates won't heed my warnings, then I'll

petition the Queen; and if the Queen refuses my petition . . ." His voice shook, and he had to pause before finishing. "If no one in authority will stop you, then I'll spread word of what you are to the people of our queendom, so that you can be stripped of your power, and the prisoners can be saved from you."

His voice had risen by the end. Even the guards furthest down the corridor were now frankly craning their necks to watch the proceedings, while Mr. Urman's eyes had gone as wide as a small boy's. Elsdon did not turn his gaze to see what Mr. Sobel's expression held. He kept his eyes fixed upon the High Seeker, as he had upon the schoolyard bullies who made the mistake of trying to beat weaker boys in his presence.

If the High Seeker sensed a fraying of his carefully spun web, he showed no sign of it. In a voice as quiet as before, he said, "There is no need to go that far. Mr. Sobel, Mr. Taylor wishes to become better acquainted with the supervisory duties of the Codifier. He is to have access to my prisoners at all times, including when I am searching the prisoners."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice was a soft murmur; Elsdon caught a glimpse of his closed expression.

Layle Smith turned his eyes back to the younger Seeker. "I will speak with Mr. Chapman and have this arrangement formalized with the Codifier. You may want to request access to all of the prisoners in the dungeon, so that you can have the opportunity to compare my techniques with those of the other Seekers."

For a moment more, the High Seeker's gaze remained fixed upon Elsdon's. Then, as though the exchange had been of no importance, he turned to the day guards and relieved them of their duty for that shift. As Elsdon spun on the ball of his foot, he heard the High Seeker giving orders for the night guards to admit him to the cell. His voice was as level as it had been all along.

Not until he had reached the corridor where the Seekers' cells lay did Elsdon permit himself to pound his fist against the wall and swear under his breath. Garrett had been right. That much was clear now: the High Seeker would seek to continue his reign of terror, not by defending himself, but by defiling Elsdon's reputation. He would make the Seeker-in-

Training appear to be a childish, hysterical young boy whose word could not be trusted in important matters.

It was a technique that Elsdon was well acquainted with.

He fumbled with the key in the lock, feeling the touch of one of the antique torture devices along his back, even though he knew that Layle Smith was now ensconced with his prisoner. Elsdon would need to return quickly to Garrett's cell, before Layle Smith wreaked any more damage. For now, though, a more vital task lay before him.

Lighting the oil lamp, he searched swiftly and found Garrett's records where he had dropped them, on the floor next to the High Seeker's bed. He knelt down and carefully leafed through them, trying to judge whether they had already been tampered with. He suspected they had: the records were one long string of rebukes against Garrett, making it appear that Garrett, too, could not be trusted if he made complaint against the High Seeker. Elsdon's jaw began to ache from the gritting of his teeth. He read on.

Gradually he became aware that his right calf was touching a hard object. He turned his eyes and saw, in the darkness of the shadows under the bed, a book that had been hastily shoved there. He picked it up slowly, as he might have lifted a poisonous asp. Under the lamplight, the book's title shone clear: *Man's Cruelty to Man.*

The book had been so hastily closed that one of the pages was folded over. Elsdon opened the volume and began to read.

> . . . many accounts of the cruel lusts of the torturers in the early years of Yclau's royal dungeon. We hear, for example, of the tragic fate of a young man delivered for searching to the dungeon. This tale comes from a guard who later wrote a book denouncing the torturer's actions.
>
> "The prisoner was bound to the rack and stretched until his cries became piteous to the extreme, and he swore that he would confess to any crime his torturer wished. That dark man, however, was not satisfied with what he had accomplished already. Borrowing a

> dagger from me, he tore open the prisoner's clothes, exposing the prisoner's young flesh and ripping blood from the helpless victim's chest and belly. The prisoner's renewed cries inflamed the lasciviousness of the torturer. Taking into his hands the Swelling Globe, he reached for the prisoner's groin . . ."

"Love poems," muttered Elsdon, and with a flash of energy he hurled the book against the wall, where it landed with a crash, split, and fell to pieces upon the floor.

Something lighter than the book fluttered through the air and landed face up upon the tattered ruins of the volume. Elsdon, who had risen to his feet with Garrett's records in hand, found himself walking, not toward the door, but toward the ruined book. He knelt down beside it and picked up the piece of card that had landed there.

Upon the card, squeezed flat, was the flower he had given Layle Smith. It was bound to the card by a thread, which carefully wove its way around the stem like spider's silk. At the bottom of the card, in the High Seeker's neat handwriting, was a single word: "Elsdon."

The card with the imprisoned flower slipped from Elsdon's hands. He buried his face in his palms and began to weep hard.

o—o—o

"Mr. Gerson," said the High Seeker softly, "I think you have failed to understand the gravity of what you have done, and the seriousness of your present position. You gave Mr. Chapman's note to a man whom you knew to be unauthorized to carry private communications between Seekers. That he is a Seeker himself is irrelevant, as you well know – he has not finished or even begun his training. To make matters worse, this man was recently a prisoner of the Eternal Dungeon. If you learned anything during your training, it is that former prisoners of this dungeon often require many weeks of healing after their imprisonment. They certainly do not need to have such healing interrupted by a visit to a rack room while it is in use. To make matters doubly worse, the man in question has undergone abuse at his father's hands over many years – abuse all too similar in appearance to the techniques used by Seekers in the rack room. This you know also,

not only because you are the most active member of this dungeon's gossip circuit, but also because you have claimed this man as your mate."

The High Seeker's use of the street word "mate" – rather than the more refined word "friend" – was like a whiplash across Garrett's face. He felt himself flinch. He had thought that he knew what Seekers were like, from having witnessed Chapman with prisoners, but he was rapidly learning the difference between a workman and a master.

The High Seeker, who had been leaning forward, now placed his hand upon the wall against which Garrett stood, leaning in yet further. Almost the first words Smith had spoken when he came into the cell was to remind Garrett of the Code's rule against Seekers and prisoners touching each other. The reason for this nursery lesson had not become clear to Garrett until he realized, as the hours passed, that the High Seeker was edging himself closer and closer to Garrett. He was sly in the manner he did so; nobody could have accused him of violating the rule against touching. But the end result of this maneuvering was that Garrett was flattened against the wall, not daring to move lest he touch the High Seeker, be accused of breaking the Code, and end up on the receiving end of Urman's whip.

He could ask Smith to move, of course. But that would be an easy way to concede him a victory in this war of wills.

"To reveal the private writings of a Seeker is terrible enough," the High Seeker said, still speaking softly, "but you may well have deprived the Eternal Dungeon of a new Seeker, and the enormity of that crime ought to be clear to you. The Eternal Dungeon is hard pressed to find men who are qualified for such work, and this particular man would suffer much if he were to strip himself of his hood, for he is eternally confined within the dungeon, whether or not he remains a Seeker. I had intended to introduce him slowly to the principles of breaking, in a manner consonant with his sensitive background. Thanks to your intervention, it is doubtful now whether he will be willing to proceed with his training—"

"Give it up, Seeker," Garrett said. "All this fancy talk of duty to the dungeon is just a screen. You're miffed that your love-boy saw you for what you truly are: a bloody barbarian, as bad as the Vovimians."

The look on Urman's face as Garrett spoke in his native street language almost made Garrett laugh. He wasn't sure what had motivated Smith to bring in the guards that were usually left outside the cell during a searching. Probably he was trying to cover his tracks, to keep from being falsely accused of abusing his prisoner.

That had left Garrett with one less plan to work with. Now, eight hours later, with his body stiff with weariness, Garrett was inclined to forget all his subtle plotting and to undertake the riskiest of plans: he would goad the High Seeker into showing his true self.

Smith seemed unperturbed. He had arranged matters such that Garrett's back was against the furnace wall, which was causing sweat to tickle Garrett's body. Smith was full in the light, but his hood hid all of his face except for his green eyes, asparkle under the firelight.

It occurred to Garrett that Smith must be all too familiar with Garrett's mode of attack. Hundreds of prisoners must have insulted him; long ago he would have acquired barriers of defense to hold them off. Desperately, Garrett searched back upon Smith's words, as a Seeker might, to see where Smith's weakness lay.

And discovered it. Smith had not yet used Taylor's name. That told Garrett a great deal.

He hesitated. He could be discarding his best weapon if he took this path. But Taylor was the reason he was here, and that bloody boy hadn't even pretended he'd try to get Garrett released. No, Taylor was of no further use, except insofar as he represented the weak spot in the High Seeker's defenses.

Garrett smiled at the High Seeker, and had the satisfaction of seeing Smith step back from him. Pressing his advantage, he took a step forward; Smith took two steps back. Now serene in his vision of the future, Garrett said softly, "Oh, but you two deserve each other, don't you? You're two of a kind. I'll wager that what bothered Taylor in the rack room was that he couldn't get his hands on the prisoner himself. You can see it from the way he talks about his dad. He's just aching to do the same sort of stuff himself, so he has to keep saying, 'I'm not like him, he's disgusting,' and all the other lies you molesters tell yourselves. You'll provide him with a new

way to lie to himself, won't you? You'll give him the chance he wants, to beat prisoners as long and hard as he can. That bloody kin-murderer—"

The cavern collapsed, and its weight fell upon Garrett.

It was a moment before he realized that the High Seeker had him pinned to the wall. He could no longer see the High Seeker's eyes – they had turned unexpectedly black under the furnace-light – but he could feel the man's hands pushing him back against the hot wall: hands steady and hard and very powerful. Far more powerful than Garrett had anticipated. Garrett looked at the black gaze pressing at him through the hood, and the thought came to him that he was about to die.

Then a hand took hold of the High Seeker's arm, and Sobel's quiet voice said, "Sir . . ."

"Yes." In the next moment, the mountain of pressure upon Garrett was released. He gasped at the lifting. The High Seeker stepped back, not moving his eyes, which were still dark. His breath was loud and heavy. After a moment, he said, "Mr. Urman. You and Mr. Sobel go off-duty in a short while."

"Yes, sir, after you relieve—" Urman stopped, then said carefully, "After we are relieved by the day guards, sir."

Urman had his hand on his dagger, and his gaze lay upon Sobel, who was in turn watching the High Seeker carefully. Both guards were within reach of the High Seeker, and Sobel had placed himself so that he could, if need be, stand between the High Seeker and the prisoner. It was all in accordance with standard procedure, Garrett knew. He too had been trained on how to behave if the Code must be upheld against a Seeker.

The High Seeker looked at neither of the guards beside him. He said, "When you go off-duty, Mr. Urman, I would appreciate it if you would ask the Record-keeper to assign a new Seeker to Mr. Gerson." He took a step backwards and added, "Thank you, Mr. Sobel. Mr. Gerson, I apologize. Rest assured that you will be in safe hands with your new Seeker."

He had turned and was opening the cell door with his master key before Garrett was able to recover his senses. Then he shouted, "Don't think you

won't pay for this, Smith! I'll see that your hood is removed for this! And when Taylor finds out what you've done—"

His voice was cut off by the sound of the cell door closing sharply behind the High Seeker. Garrett stood motionless a moment, struggling with the mixture of emotions Smith had left him with. On the one hand, he was annoyed at himself for giving in to fear; he ought to have known that the High Seeker would not get away with any dark dealings here, not with two guards present. But that made the fact that Smith had tried to do so all the more satisfactory. If the High Seeker had knelt and laid down his whip at Garrett's feet, the outcome could not have been better.

Smiling, Garrett turned his gaze toward the guards, only to discover, with shock, that both of them were regarding him with reproachful expressions. Bloody blades, what was the matter with them? *He* was the one who had been assaulted. He was the one who deserved sympathy.

It just went to show what he had known all along: that the Eternal Dungeon would not give him the justice he deserved.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As the Eternal Dungeon's gates slammed shut behind the exiting bats, a Seeker stormed into the entry hall. "Do you know what that rapist has done now?" the Seeker shouted over the voices of guards chatting with one another.

In the sudden pause of conversation, a second Seeker looked up from where he had been talking with the Record-keeper. In one swift movement he strode forward, grabbed the Seeker who had spoken, and shoved him into the documents library.

He slammed the door shut and lifted his face-cloth. "Mr. Taylor," he said in the tone he reserved for prisoners facing the rack, "let me remind you that certain topics are sealed by the Codifier and may not be spoken of in the presence of those who are unaware of the sealed records' contents. Anyone violating the seal will face discipline from the Codifier."

"But he assaulted Garrett!" cried Elsdon, flinging up the flap of his own hood.

"I'm aware of that," Mr. Chapman said dryly. "The entire dungeon is aware of it. However, if it would give you pleasure to scream the fact at the top of your lungs, feel free to do so."

Elsdon, who had been pacing up and down the narrow confines of the book-lined room, halted and looked back at Mr. Chapman. "The guards reported his assault?"

"He reported it himself. The Codifier has sentenced him to six months' suspension."

"Six months!" shouted Elsdon. "He deserves to be executed! How many more prisoners will he attack before somebody stops him? He—"

His voice was suddenly muffled by Mr. Chapman's hand descending hard upon his mouth; the other hand gripped his arm. "Mr. Taylor," Mr. Chapman said low in his ear, "given your background, I do not want to resort to having you arrested, but I will do so if you do not return to conducting yourself in a professional manner."

Elsdon stood motionless. After a moment, Mr. Chapman released him and asked quietly, "Are you all right?"

Elsdon folded his arms against his chest, trying to stop the shaking. "Don't," he whispered. "You don't have to do that. Even if the High Seeker ordered you to arrest me—"

"Ordered me to arrest you? Mr. Taylor, what are you speaking of?"

The surprise in the older Seeker's voice seemed genuine. Elsdon stared at him, saying, "I thought . . . Aren't you helping Mr. Smith to . . . ?" His words died away as a crease of puzzlement furrowed Mr. Chapman's brow.

"Helping him to do what?"

"Nothing," Elsdon said slowly. "I was wrong about that. I forgot that you were his prisoner too." His chest rose as he swallowed a breath. He said, in a more formal manner, "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have been shouting. But what the High Seeker did to Garrett—"

"How did you learn of the assault?"

"Through Garrett, of course. He told me everything that happened."

"And what did he tell you?"

"That he was answering the High Seeker's questions when suddenly Mr. Smith went mad and began battering him. Mr. Chapman, how can the Codifier even *consider* letting Mr. Smith keep his post?"

Mr. Chapman sighed and went over to turn up the light in the lamp that dimly shimmered in the documents library. Leaning against a stack of prisoner records, he said, "Mr. Taylor, if a prisoner told you that he had been battered by a Seeker, what would be the first thing you would do?"

There was a pause before Elsdon said, "Have the healer examine him for signs of the battering. Mr. Chapman, if you're trying to imply that a battering didn't take place, you're wrong. The High Seeker lied to you if he told you otherwise."

"The High Seeker," Mr. Chapman said carefully, "has spoken to no one but the Codifier. All the information I have comes from the guards who were

witness to the assault – including Mr. Sobel, whose testimony I believe you value. They say that Mr. Smith shoved Mr. Gerson against the wall and held him there for no more than five drops of the water-clock. Mr. Gerson received a slight bump to the head but nothing more. Incidentally, the guards report that Mr. Smith committed this assault after Mr. Gerson insulted you."

Elsdon stared at the other Seeker. "What?" he whispered.

The lamp-wick had burned low by the time that Mr. Chapman was finished speaking. Outside the door of the documents library came the low rumble of the Record-keeper's voice as he spoke to some visiting guards who were delivering a prisoner. Elsdon sat on a pile of crates containing records from the Eternal Dungeon's earliest years; his arms were wrapped around his legs, and his chin rested upon his knees.

After a long silence he looked up and said, "If this is true, then I was wrong about Mr. Gerson. I mean, I've always known that he is . . . changeable in his moods, but I thought he was steadfast in matters of friendship. If he truly spoke like that about me, he isn't what I thought he was. But whether or not Garrett acted like that, I was right about Mr. Smith. He's a sadist."

"You need hardly tell me that," Mr. Chapman said, his voice turning dry once more.

Elsdon shook his head slowly, trying to sort his thoughts into recognizable patterns. "I don't understand how you could have been his love-mate. I mean, I just can't envision you— I'm sorry, I know it's no business of mine —" He looked over at Mr. Chapman and frowned. "Why are you smiling?"

"That was ill-timed; I apologize. I was just amused at Mr. Smith's old-fashioned vocabulary." Seeing Elsdon's blank look, he added, "His reference to me as his love-mate."

Elsdon blinked several times as he stared. "But weren't you his love-mate?"

"In the traditional sense of the word, yes. We loved each other. I've never been in his bedroom, though, nor he in mine."

"But—" Elsdon rose to his feet, nearly toppling the crates in his haste. "Mr. Partridge . . . and Mr. Zinner . . ."

Mr. Chapman sighed. "Mr. Taylor, if you're trying to determine whether Mr. Smith has shared his bed with anyone during his time in the Eternal Dungeon, the answer is no. He may have had love-mates before his arrival here, but for the past seventeen years he has slept alone."

Elsdon whirled to face the lamp, failed to find the answer he was seeking there, and whirled to face Mr. Chapman again. "But surely . . . Why did your bond with him end?"

"For the same reason that yours did, I assume. I'm afraid that his type of love was not the sort I felt comfortable with."

"But there must be *someone* in the dungeon who wouldn't mind going to bed with him!"

Mr. Chapman shrugged as he reached his fingers under the back of his hood to scratch at an itch. "Very likely. How many masochists, though, do you think apply to become Seekers? I've always thought that being a Seeker who's a sadist is like being a Seeker who's only attracted to women. The chances that you'll ever be able to have a love-mate are not worth calculating."

Elsdon stood still a moment, chewing his knuckles. Mr. Chapman glanced at the water-clock in the corner and flipped down his face-cloth, saying, "The Codifier has placed me in charge of the dungeon during the High Seeker's suspension. I must warn you, Mr. Taylor: I come down hard on guards who spread gossip about inner dungeon residents, and I'll do the same to you if you do not show discretion regarding Mr. Smith's disciplinary troubles. If you have any concerns about the discipline he has been given, you should speak to the Codifier."

"Yes," said Elsdon slowly. "I'll do that." He flipped down his hood and followed Mr. Chapman into the entry hall.

Two of the dungeon guards were leading a bound prisoner, with an eyeless hood over his head, through the door to the corridor lined with breaking cells. Mr. Aaron was standing by the tablet; he erased one of the names

that had been on the tablet and wrote in the name of the new prisoner. As Mr. Chapman went over to speak with his senior-most guard, Elsdon hesitated, his eye travelling over the names that had been lined out. He said spontaneously, "Mr. Aaron!"

"Yes, sir?" The bald-headed Record-keeper peered at him over his owlish spectacles.

"The prisoner who was previously in Rack Room A – what happened to him?"

The Record-keeper gave an impatient look, as he always did when another dungeon dweller failed to know the exact details of the fate of any of the tens of thousands of prisoners who had dwelt in this place. "Mr. Parris confessed that he had been taking the blame for a murder committed by his brother. His trial was held yesterday; Mr. Parris's Seeker succeeded in obtaining his release on the grounds of his innocence."

Elsdon was silent a moment, then said, "How high a level of the rack was the prisoner at when the confession was given?"

The Record-keeper sighed deeply. "Would that I knew. I have only received the High Seeker's report on the searching. —Mr. Sobel!" he said as a guard entered the entry hall from the entrance to the outer dungeon. "Mr. Taylor has requested to know the level at which Mr. Parris offered his confession. I do not have that information because you have not submitted your report yet."

Mr. Sobel gave an apologetic smile in response to this grave accusation. "I'm about to prepare it now, Mr. Aaron. The prisoner broke at level one," he added to Elsdon.

Elsdon shook his head. "He couldn't have – not unless you slackened the straps. He was at level nine when I left him."

"Mr. Taylor, I had control of the wheel," the guard said quietly. "The prisoner was taken no higher than level one, in accordance with Mr. Smith's prior orders."

Elsdon glanced around at the nearby guards and at the Record-keeper, who was continuing to scribble upon the tablet. Taking hold of Mr. Sobel's arm,

he pulled him aside. "Look," he said in a low, tense voice, "don't try to cover up for Mr. Smith – about this or anything else. I was there; I heard the High Seeker order you to take the prisoner up to level nine."

"Did he say that?" Mr. Sobel asked.

"Yes, of course he did! You heard him—"

Elsdon broke off, the echo of Layle Smith's words reverberating in his head. After a moment, Mr. Sobel touched him softly and said, "I have to go on duty, but we should talk later."

Elsdon nodded wordlessly. He turned and was about to pass the Record-keeper and the great tablet when something caused his eye to travel up toward the ceiling of the cavern. He took root in the ground.

At the very top of the tablet, someone had erased the High Seeker's name.

o—o—o

Mr. Daniels was a small, round-cheeked man with warm blue eyes and tidy hair that he kept clipped short. His desk was equally tidy, appearing like a housewife's dream of the perfectly ordered home. He spoke in a rich, quiet baritone and made no abrupt gestures.

He was popularly believed to have been a dragon in his previous life. As Elsdon stepped into the Codifier's office, Mr. Daniels, sitting at his desk, looked up at Elsdon with his usual fiery gaze and said nothing.

Elsdon cleared his throat, having suddenly found it clogged. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. It concerns the High Seeker's discipline."

"Yes." The baritone was as rich as a blazing fire.

Elsdon swallowed and said, "I was wondering how you reached the decision to sentence Mr. Smith to six months' suspension."

The Codifier folded his hands upon each other in the slow, careful movement of a dragon who is contemplating his next meal. "Decisions on disciplinary matters are made in consultation with the Magisterial Guild, the Queen, the High Seeker, and the person under discipline. In cases where the parties disagree on the discipline, it is my duty to make a

decision on the proper sentence. Usually this involves finding a compromise between the shortest sentence proposed and the longest sentence proposed."

"And Mr. Smith proposed that he receive less than six months' suspension?"

The hands remained motionless; the fiery eyes continued to burn. "All matters related to the discipline of inner dungeon residents are sealed. Did you have any other questions, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon chewed on his lip for a moment. He slowly pulled the crumpled card out of his pocket and handed it to the Codifier.

Mr. Daniels looked at the card, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Kindly bar the door, Mr. Taylor."

Several minutes later, Elsdon looked up from the record-book he was reading, his eyes wide. "I don't understand," he said. "Mr. Smith told me that he had raped a prisoner."

"Rape is regarded by the *Code of Seeking* as a sexual assault upon an unwilling or incapacitated prisoner," the Codifier replied, his hands as motionless as before. "Mr. Smith kissed a prisoner while she was bound. That was a severe violation of his duty as a Seeker."

"But to sentence him to three months' suspension for a single kiss . . . How did you decide to give him this sentence?"

The Codifier's eyes were as unblinking as a reptile's. "Decisions on disciplinary matters are made in consultation with the Magisterial Guild, the Queen, the High Seeker, and the person under discipline. In cases where the parties disagree on the discipline, it is my duty to make a decision on the proper sentence. Usually this involves finding a compromise between the shortest sentence proposed and the longest sentence proposed."

Elsdon looked down at the guards' witness he was reading, then carefully closed the volume and looked back at the Codifier. "Mr. Smith asked for the longer sentence, didn't he?" he said quietly. "He asked you to dismiss him as a Seeker, both last time and this time."

"The exact manner in which sentences are decided upon is not a matter that can be released. Do you have any other questions, Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes," said Elsdon, standing up. "But they aren't questions for you."

o—o—o

"I think you should leave here," she said.

Elsdon looked over from where he sat, his legs wrapped around the back of his chair, his chin resting atop the chair back. "Leave?" he said, startled. "How can I leave?"

She looked at him with that expression of innocent surprise that came over her face so often. In the bright spring light of Elsdon's bedroom, her hair glowed like embers; her skin was as golden as honey. "You pack up your belongings," she said. "You walk out the door . . ."

"Sara." He tried to keep his voice level, knowing that, if he shouted, she would flinch like a kicked kitten. "Father is paying me to care for his household. Even if he weren't my father, he's my workmaster – I can't simply walk away from him. And where would I go if I did? No one would hire me—"

"Yes, they will!" she said eagerly. "Anyone would hire you! I'll give you a letter that tells them what a good worker you are!"

He sighed. She was only four years younger than him, but sometimes he felt as though his sister was still the tiny baby he had been playing with on the day his mother died. She was too innocent to know that workmasters required stronger references than that of a sister; she was innocent enough to still think he had abilities beyond the small ones needed to run his father's household.

He got up and walked over to where she stood as she stroked a feather that had blown in through the open window. "Sara," he said softly, taking her by the shoulders, "I can't leave him, not unless he wants me to."

She looked up; her eyes were brighter than usual from the liquid forming in them. "You can't stay here. You can't keep letting him tie you up. You —"

She stopped suddenly as he put his hand swiftly over her mouth. He kept it there until the passing servants were well down the hallway of the house. Then he let his hands drop, saying, "He punishes me for a reason. I think— I think it's because I'm like Mother. I have her temper. I— You know I threw a vase at him once."

"You missed."

"I almost hit him. That's why he punishes me. If I can only find a way to make myself less like Mother and more like him—"

"Elsdon, that's stupid!" His sister curled her fingers carefully around the feather. "He wouldn't tie you up all night and hit you with his belt because you once threw a vase at him! There must be another reason. Maybe he'll explain if you go away."

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can! Elsdon, I'm not going to spend another sleepless night hearing you cry in the next room. If you won't go away, I'll – I'll tell Uncle Harden."

"No!" He took hold of her shoulders again, more firmly. "Sara, you swore you wouldn't tell anyone! No one must know—"

"I'll tell him, I promise I will!" Sara voice was rising. "I'll tell everyone about you and Father!"

"Keep your voice down!"

He could hear the faint murmur of servants downstairs, doing their daily chores. He put his hand toward Sara's mouth, but she pulled away, saying, "I'll tell everyone if you don't leave!"

"Stop it!" The servants were still murmuring. They were used enough to sibling fights in this household, which never came to anything but abject apologies on both sides. But at any moment now, a servant might pass and hear. . . .

He grabbed Sara's arm and tried to pull her to him so that he could stifle her mouth. "Stop it!" she said. "That hurts!" And then, when he kept pulling her, she slapped him across the face.

For a moment all was still. The servants, unconcerned, continued to work belowstairs. The open window brought in the sound of birds, laughing children on the street, and, very faintly, the voice of Auburn Taylor, visiting a neighbor.

Elsdon stared at Sara with horror. She had always been the quiet one, the one who was gentle and loving, like his father. Now, suddenly, he saw her resemblance to his mother: she had the same reddish hair, and her eyes blazed with the same fierceness.

"No!" he said, more to the fates than to Sara. It mustn't happen. She mustn't become like him. If she did . . .

Sara had begun struggling in his arms again. She was becoming hysterical. He remembered his mother as he had last seen her, fighting with his father before she stormed away and fell down the stairs to her death. Sweet blood, Sara was just like her mother. He had to stop her; he had to keep her pure.

He slapped her.

The force of his blow drove her to the floor. She stared up at him, mouth agape, then said in a quavering voice, "You *beast*! I'll tell everyone now. I don't care about your stupid secret—"

It was all he needed. He launched himself at her, his fists flying like cannonballs, with all of his surface thoughts focussed on what he must do to keep her from becoming corrupt like himself. Only he could save her; only he loved her that much.

It was not until the end, when she lay limp and broken on the floor like the feather in her hand, that a deeper thought worked its way to the surface of Elsdon's mind.

Good, the deeper part of him whispered. *Now she'll never be able to hurt you as he does.*

o—o—o

The Seeker-in-Training sat in the corner of the breaking cell, his upraised legs tight against his chest and his head buried in his arms.

He made no sound.

o—o—o

The High Seeker, when Elsdon found him, was in the corner of his bedroom. Sitting in the corner, with his legs drawn up against his chest, and his arms cradling his knees. His face was hidden within his arms. Nearby, untouched, lay the shattered book of torture, and next to it on the floor, spread open, was the *Code of Seeking.*

Elsdon saw all this for only a moment. Then the High Seeker stood, flipping down the flap of his hood before Elsdon could catch sight of his face. Elsdon said, before the other man could speak, "I still have your key."

"Thank you for returning it to me." Layle Smith's voice was flat. He remained where he was, like a Seeker keeping a careful distance from his prisoner.

Elsdon fingered the key in his pocket. As he did so, he said, "I've been in a breaking cell for the past three hours, thinking. About my father, mainly."

The High Seeker made no reply. His posture was upright, his hands stiff, as they were when he was at his work.

Elsdon said, "My father . . . I've reached the conclusion that he was afraid. I don't know what he was afraid of; I don't suppose I will ever know. But rather than face his fear and deal with it, he took the coward's way. He found someone more vulnerable than himself, someone who could be easily hurt, and he treated that person as the object of his fear. He sought out some error I'd made – it didn't matter how small an error, any wrongdoing would have been enough for his purposes – and he used it as an excuse to destroy me."

"You have a keen understanding of the nature of evil men." The High Seeker's voice was quiet. "It will serve you well in your work. Do you also understand that a criminal – no matter how great the evil he has committed, no matter how great a punishment he deserves – may regret what he has done?"

"Yes," said Elsdon, raising his face-cloth. "I do regret it."

There was a moment's pause. It was after midnight now; the noises of the outer dungeon had slowed, and only the faint sound of screams came from the direction of the inner dungeon. The room was bright with lamplight, delineating the High Seeker in an uncompromising fashion, but for his face, which remained hidden.

The High Seeker said, "I don't understand what you mean."

Elsdon stepped forward then, closing the gap between the High Seeker and himself. "You're a sadist," he said.

The High Seeker remained unmoved where he was. He did not reply.

"You receive pleasure from other people's pain," Elsdon persisted.

"Mr. Taylor—" The voice wavered slightly, and Elsdon came to a halt, an arm's breadth from the High Seeker. The latter said in a low, rapid voice, "Mr. Taylor, please believe that I regret exceedingly what occurred between us. I should not have allowed matters to take the course they did. After what happened with Mr. Zinner, I ought to have known . . ." His voice trailed off.

"It wouldn't have made any difference, would it?" Elsdon said. "I was your prisoner, and you fell in love with me. The two facts are tied together for you: when you see me and are drawn to me, you can't help but think of me in pain. You can't help but enjoy that."

He was close enough now to see the High Seeker's eyes; thus he saw the moment when Layle Smith closed his eyes against what Elsdon was saying. The eyes reopened almost immediately, though the High Seeker's hands were now curled into fists.

"Mr. Taylor." The High Seeker's voice was even less steady than before. "I cannot ask you to forgive me for what I have done. Some wrongdoings are of too great a magnitude to be forgiven. All I can ask is that you not allow the evil I've committed to destroy the career you have before you. If you continue with your work, you will be a strong Seeker, and I assure you that all of my interactions with you henceforth will be on the professional level."

"As they are with Mr. Chapman?"

"Yes," said the High Seeker. "Exactly that way."

Elsdon shook his head slowly. "High Seeker," he said, "do you even know what you are?"

"Yes." Layle Smith's voice was stiff. "I am a sadist."

"You're a sadist," Elsdon agreed. He bent down and picked up the book lying face open upon the ground. He glanced down at it and read, "'A Seeker must not allow himself to be swayed by any feeling he experiences in the presence of a prisoner, whether those feelings be of pity or passion or pleasure. At all times he must put aside his own feelings and needs for the sake of the prisoner. . . .'" He looked up toward the motionless man standing before him. "Why didn't I recognize this before? These are bindings upon a sadist. They are two hundred and seventeen ways to keep yourself from harming the prisoners."

"I am still a sadist." The High Seeker's voice was rigid. "I still receive pleasure from other people's pain."

"Yes," said Elsdon. He stepped forward and placed the Code in the High Seeker's hands, then reached up and lifted the face-cloth.

Layle's face was as he had known it would be: etched with a pain as deep as that of a man who has reached his limits upon the rack. Elsdon touched the High Seeker's face.

"How terrible that must be for you," he said quietly. "If it would ease your burden to dream of torturing me or raping me or even binding me . . . I give you my permission to do so."

The vulnerability and deep agony remained in the High Seeker's face, as it always did, though normally hidden by the formality he used to hood himself from the world. Layle whispered, in a tone like a plea, "Elsdon . . ."

Elsdon reached forward and pulled Layle into his arms. Even before the first touch, Layle had begun to shake.

"It's all right, love," Elsdon said softly to his love-mate as Layle buried his face upon Elsdon's shoulder. "It's all right. I'm here now, and I won't

leave."

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o—o—o

. . . What examples we possess are just as often records of his failures, yet we should not underestimate the influence that even his failures had.

An example of this can be found in the case of Garrett Gerson, one of the few prisoners of the Eternal Dungeon whose life can be easily traced through surviving documents.

At age nineteen, Gerson was granted the much-coveted post of guard in the Eternal Dungeon, but only two years later he was arrested for permitting an unauthorized person access to a Seeker's writings. Since the Eternal Dungeon was directly under the control of the Queen, this was the equivalent of a treason charge, and Gerson faced the possibility of a death sentence. Upon learning, however, that Gerson had impregnated his girlfriend, Layle Smith recommended to the Codifier that Gerson be punished only with dismissal from the Eternal Dungeon. The High Seeker's concern over Gerson is all the more remarkable because he himself was undergoing disciplinary troubles at this time that seem to have been an outgrowth of his handling of the Gerson case. (See the end of the chapter for more on scholarly speculations concerning the Second Suspension, as historians term it.) Indeed, there appear to be some indications that Layle Smith went so far as to arrange for Gerson and his girlfriend to be given a grant of money in order to begin their married life.

Gerson next appears in history's records four years later, when his wife sued for divorce on the grounds of adultery. Shortly thereafter, Gerson's name begins to appear in the arrest records of Yclau's "lesser" prisons with frightening frequency, first for petty thefts, then for more serious crimes for which he received short prison sentences.

That the lesser prisons finally tired of him is shown by the fact that, seventeen years after his dismissal from the Eternal Dungeon, Gerson was arrested on the uncommon charge of raping and battering a prostitute. He was transferred to the Eternal Dungeon, where – apparently holding the unreasonable belief that he would be immediately tortured – he confessed

to the assault on his first day, giving no other explanation than that the victim "had it out for me, like everyone else."

Such a confession would have been sufficient evidence for the lesser prisons. Yet the Eternal Dungeon's records show that Gerson spent the next six months under the care of no less than three Seekers, all of them trying to extract evidence from him of repentance, so that he would receive a lesser sentence.

In the end, Gerson was transferred to the magistrates' court, where he was sentenced to be hanged. The Eternal Dungeon's Record-keeper's final entry on this prisoner reads, "Gerson's sentence commuted to life imprisonment, due to the intervention of the Queen's Secretary." This is one of the few cases where an official of the Eternal Dungeon failed to grant a prisoner his honorific.

In a note written after Gerson's dismissal, Layle Smith blamed himself for the truncation of guard's career. Yet a brief look at Gerson's records prior to his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon shows clearly that Gerson was headed toward a bad end from an early age, and that his two years under the High Seeker's watchful eye were the only period during which his life was relatively orderly and disciplined. This demonstrates that what the first High Seeker regarded as failure, other people might regard as success.

Historians may wish to take account of this fact when examining what is undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of Layle Smith's life: his early career as a Vovimian torturer.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Rebirth **3**
FIRST TIME

The year 355, the seventh month.

One of the great mysteries facing historians studying the history of the Eternal Dungeon is understanding what triggered the madness of the

dungeon's first High Seeker. By Layle Smith's own testimony, his "dreamings" (whose exact nature we will never know) had been occurring since the time he first arrived at the Eternal Dungeon. Yet his madness occurred eighteen years later, when he was thirty-six. What caused the High Seeker to lose control of himself?

Most historians trace the trigger point to six months before the crisis of the madness, when "the harm done to a Seeker" as a result of following the High Seeker's orders – which all the contemporary witnesses agree was the primary cause of the madness – evidently occurred. Yet historians who have examined carefully the surviving letters of the High Seeker disagree. They believe that the seeds of Layle Smith's madness were planted in the previous year . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

Layle Smith drew his head back from where it had been resting upon Elsdon Taylor's shoulder. The young man was still wearing the red-trimmed black hood of a Seeker-in-Training, but with the face-cloth pulled back; he smiled. Layle took a deep breath. He was still shaking from the words Elsdon had spoken a short time before – not only at what those words had told him about himself, but also at the depth of love it must have taken Elsdon to speak them.

Layle was the High Seeker; he ought to be able to penetrate behind this wall of love to find the fear that must still lie behind it. Yet try as he might, nothing he saw before him – lips smiling, eyes joyful, body calm – would reveal to him that fear. The fear remained within Elsdon; there could be no doubt of that, given the youth's background and the mind-sick manner in which Layle had initially handled Elsdon's declarations of love. Yet Elsdon seemed to have succeeded, by sheer force of his will, in driving back that fear and imprisoning it so that it could not be of harm.

Just as Layle had imprisoned his own dark desire seventeen years before. And now Elsdon had opened the cell where that desire lay bound.

Layle had never been more frightened in his life.

The young Seeker, unaware of the full cause of the shaking he must be feeling within his arms, placed his right hand behind Layle's hooded head and drew the High Seeker forward. Layle had only one moment to wonder again at how the youth who had shown such diffidence upon his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon could be so forceful in matters of love; then he felt Elsdon's lips upon his, warm and moist.

He let himself be drawn into the other Seeker's embrace. A book dropped from Layle's hand onto the floor. It was the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking*, which Elsdon had handed him a short time before. Many of the words in that oft-revised book were Layle's own: bindings he had placed upon himself years before, in one of his periodic efforts to prevent himself, and anyone like himself, from harming the prisoners. Even that, Elsdon had recognized – he had seen, in the Code's harsh indictment of abusive Seekers, Layle's own indictment of what he might become.

Of what he was. That was how he had thought of it these past seventeen years – he had thought of himself as an abuser, a rapist, a corrupt torturer who inflicted pain purely for his own enjoyment. Except for two brief falls – which he had quickly confessed – he had not yet committed such crimes in the Eternal Dungeon, but he had held no doubt in his mind that he would do so in the end. The germs of destruction lay within him; he was a sadist.

Yet Elsdon – who had more reason than any other man in the dungeon to hate and fear sadists – was holding Layle in his arms. Layle released his breath slowly and relaxed into the kiss.

The mouth was soft and tasted sweet. He could feel the desire begin to course through him, and he tightened his grip. A whimper came from the mouth he was probing, and he drew back, but only to view for himself the results of his kiss.

The prisoner stood bound and bloody against the wall, his skin mutilated in dozens of places by the blades and brands that Layle had used upon him. His hands were tied high above him, and he stood upon his toes, his feet barely reaching the ground. He was naked, of course, and Layle allowed his hand to trail down to the youth's groin. The prisoner's eyes widened, and the fear in them grew deeper . . .

With a shudder and a gasp, Layle broke free of the dreaming and of Elsdon, whirling round to face the corner.

He felt Elsdon's hand on his shoulder, firm as it pulled him back. Layle tried to look away from his new love-mate. In his memory, he still held the image of Elsdon bound and tortured.

"Layle," Elsdon said softly, "don't be this way. I told you: I give you permission to use me in your dreamings. You're not really hurting me – it's only images."

"Elsdon," he whispered, "you have no idea what I hold within me—"

"So reveal yourself to me. Would it help if you told me what you saw?"

"No!" His reply was swift and instinctive. He knew it for cowardice, but two-quarters of an hour before, he had been sitting by himself in this

bedroom, contemplating the coming decades of loneliness and shame. He could not bear to risk losing the love Elsdon had showered upon him.

Elsdon was silent a while. At last he said, "All right. Later, when you're ready. For now . . . Layle, what can I do to convince you that what you experience and what you give me are two different things? All I felt in that kiss was tenderness and warmth. If you experienced something different, it was beyond my sight."

Hope stabbed at him, painful in its intensity. During his first, terrifying occasion of kissing Elsdon, two days before, he had managed to hide from the young Seeker the existence of his own dark dreamings. Could he do so again? Could he share his bed with Elsdon in such a manner that Elsdon felt only love coming from him, not seeing the reality behind that love?

"If I should fail . . ."

Unexpectedly, Elsdon laughed. "Layle, sometimes I think that, virgin though I am, I know far more than you do about these matters. Of course you will make a mistake sooner or later. Do you remember the first day I was brought here as a prisoner? You thought I had deliberately lied to you and you had me beaten, in accordance with the Code's prescribed treatment for prisoners who lie to their Seekers. You were wrong to think I was deliberately lying, but I survived your error. All of your prisoners have survived the errors you've made over the years. It will be the same here; any mistakes you make won't destroy me. What we have between us is too strong for that."

Layle stared at Elsdon, trying to see the bound prisoner, the diffident youth, the Seeker-in-Training . . . all the weaknesses and frailties he had assumed drew him to Elsdon. What he saw before him was a man stronger than himself in matters of love, capable of enduring more than a decade of bindings and beatings from an abusive father, and then entering the bedroom of a man he knew to be a sadist, and offering his body and soul.

There was no frailty here, yet Layle could feel that his own desire had not waned. Something was occurring that he had not expected. Elsdon was not the prisoner – Layle was. Layle was not the man conducting the searching – Elsdon was. Layle had fallen in love with a man gentle enough to be

imagined as a terrified prisoner, but strong enough to accept the dangers of sharing the bed of a sadist.

Elsdon reached forward and brushed back the hair from his eyes. "Trust me," he said softly.

Layle closed his eyes and nodded his head. He felt Elsdon's lips touch his cheek. Then the young Seeker said, "Love, I don't want to probe into the privacy of your life before the Eternal Dungeon, but it would help if I was sure . . . You do know what we're about to do, don't you? Because truly, I never got beyond kisses with the girls at school. . . ."

It was another point at which he knew he should be honest; he should tell Elsdon the truth of where his dreamings came from. He imagined himself doing so, and his heart cowered back. He opened his eyes and smiled at Elsdon, saying, "I know our path well enough that we won't have to stop to ask others for directions."

Elsdon's eyes searched his face for a moment, as though sensing that more lay behind the answer than had been spoken, but he was still new to his art. The young Seeker nodded after a moment and leaned forward to kiss him.

Layle allowed himself to be kissed, but his mind was elsewhere. When Elsdon surfaced a minute later, Layle said, "My dear . . . did your father ever speak to you when he was hurting you?"

A darkness passed over Elsdon's face, like the shadows that clustered in the cavern holding the Eternal Dungeon. "Not really. Whenever he first started to bind me, he'd be chatting about my schoolwork or something like that, but he'd fall silent soon afterwards, and he'd say little until he was through. Why? Are you worried about whether you should speak to me while we're making love?"

"I'm wondering whether your father gave you any orders."

"Oh." Elsdon's voice was quiet; Layle could see that he understood. "No, he didn't, Layle, truly." He smiled, adding, "The only people I associate with order-giving are my old schoolmasters, and I was quite happy at school. Following orders wouldn't spark any painful memories for me."

Layle felt himself growing more tense, and he struggled to make himself understood. "Elsdon, when you kiss me, your reality is here, in what you do. That's where your desire comes from. But when I kiss you, my reality is outside this room, in my dreamings . . ."

Elsdon touched his palm against Layle's cheek. "Your reality is here, in your love for me. But I understand what you're saying: you need something to happen here that connects with your dreamings. Otherwise, nothing that happens between us will raise your desire."

"If it would be too hard for you . . . The first time we kissed, I didn't try to do anything like this . . ."

"And you were completely disconnected from me. I felt that, and I knew that something was wrong." Elsdon smiled and took Layle's hands in his. "Love, I want part of you to be here, with me. If giving me orders helps to keep you halfway in this world, I'll be happy to obey you."

The very word "obey" sent a flame of desire through him so keen that it was a moment before he could speak. Then he said, his voice more husky, "If I should do anything that makes you uncomfortable—"

"I'll tell you. Or more likely, you'll sense it. Stop worrying, love."

Layle put his arm around Elsdon's waist. Though his desire was beginning to draw him away, he was not so far gone that he had forgotten Elsdon's fear of binding and restriction. He kept his arm light upon Elsdon's waist, as though Elsdon were a prisoner who had been so hard tortured that he might fall to pieces at any strong touch.

He took a step forward to stand chest-to-chest with the young Seeker. He could feel now the warm hardness under Elsdon's trousers, and he wondered that Elsdon could maintain his desire through such a conversation as they had just held. Tightening his grip slightly, he said in a low voice, "I want you to do as I tell you. If you begin to be hurt or disturbed by what I'm doing, you're to say so, but otherwise you're to remain silent. Do you understand?"

Elsdon nodded, apparently undisturbed by Layle's peremptory tone. Schoolmasters, thought Layle. In what followed, he must try to act as

much as possible like a schoolmaster. Certainly he must not do anything that would seem fatherly.

He had been working in his profession for twenty years, yet he had never done anything as difficult as this: to try to shape his own dreamings in such a way that they did not call up another man's dark memories. He was trying to imagine abuse at the same time he was trying to keep his love-mate from remembering abuse; he could have cried at the absurdity of it. What the bloody blades was Elsdon doing here? Why couldn't the youth have fallen in love with a kind, gentle love-mate who would have given him what he needed to heal from his father's woundings?

He was strongly tempted to set his own dreamings aside and concentrate his mind solely on giving Elsdon pleasure. But it would be a very naive virgin indeed who failed to notice that his partner felt no desire, and Elsdon was not the sort of man to take without giving. That was one of the things that bound them.

Layle's desire lay within the cell; the door stood open, unlocked by Elsdon, but the desire remained chained to the wall. Layle took a deep breath and brought his hammer down in the first strike to break the chain.

"Disclothe yourself," he said in a deep voice.

Elsdon, his smile gone, stepped back, not moving his gaze from Layle. The bedroom was small; the young Seeker's few steps brought him up against the bed. Elsdon's hand moved to the knot-fastenings of his shirt, and then paused. With a muted smile, he reached up and removed his hood.

Though Layle was by now well familiar with Elsdon's face, this was the first time he had seen Elsdon bareheaded in three months. Since his trial, Elsdon had worn the hood indicating that he was in training as a Seeker, though in fact his training had begun only two days before, when he walked into Rack Room A. Layle turned his mind away from that memory with the reflex of long training. Then, on second consideration, he turned back toward the memory. The image of the prisoner he quickly erased; he had always taken great care never to use the image of any real person in his dreamings, frustrating though that was. Now, as the hammer continued to chip away at the chain, he placed Elsdon upon the rack.

Before him, in this world that he had not yet left, the young Seeker had finished stripping himself. He stood straight and slim, his body pale in the manner of a rich man's son who has spent most of his life indoors; his skin was unmarred by any mark. Even the whip-mark that Layle's junior night guard had given him when he first arrived at the Eternal Dungeon had faded from his arm.

Layle knew that the other side of Elsdon looked very different; he resisted the impulse to turn Elsdon to look. Instead he said, his voice still deep, "Come here and kneel."

Elsdon walked forward slowly, his gaze still locked with Layle's. He knelt at the High Seeker's feet with simple grace, though Layle guessed that this high-born man had never knelt to anyone in his life. Layle reached up to pull down the face-cloth of his own hood.

And stopped as his hand touched the cloth. There had been the barest intake of breath from Elsdon. The young Seeker opened his mouth slightly, then closed it.

"You said you'd tell me," Layle reminded him quietly. "Don't hesitate next time."

Elsdon nodded, and Layle let his hand drop. His heart was beating hard; Elsdon could not have known the fateful decision he had just made. Through all these years, with deliberate care, Layle had always set his dreamings in the Yclau royal dungeon – not in its present life as the Eternal Dungeon, but in its previous life, before the earliest version of the *Code of Seeking* had been born five generations before. Those days before the Code had been a time of barbarity, when the torturers of the Yclau queendom had been permitted great leeway in their dealings with prisoners.

But even then there had been restraints upon them. One of the traditions always practiced by Yclau torturers – now called Seekers in a day when torture had become a secondary method of dealing with prisoners rather than the primary one – was that the torturer hid his face from the prisoner. If a torturer derived pleasure from his work – and in those barbaric years most of the men working in this dungeon had been sadists – the prisoner would not have to endure the sight of the torturer's gleeful face.

This was a common tradition among torturers everywhere. In only one country in the world were prisoners forced to look upon the naked faces of their torturers: in Vovim, where Layle had received his training.

Layle stood motionless, trying to force his heartbeat down to a reasonable level. It had always been difficult for him, in his dreamings, to imagine kissing prisoners; he had had to lift his face-cloth briefly to reveal only the mouth. But he had considered that a price worth paying, rather than place his dreamings in Vovim, where no limits were placed upon the torturers, provided that the confession was obtained. And now Elsdon, for whom a lowered face-cloth brought back memories of his imprisonment within the Eternal Dungeon, wanted Layle to keep his face-cloth up. Sweet blood, this was going to be too dangerous . . .

It was too late. The hammer fell again, and the chain was severed.

Before him, the youth continued to kneel, his face turned up. He was quite simply the most beautiful young man Layle had seen in his years of working in the dungeon: ivory skin framed by golden-brown locks, eyes the shade of the dark blue of evening, lips deep red like a wound . . . Layle let his fingers trail over the lips, and he felt the youth tremble under him. He smiled.

"You know what I want," he said in an uncompromising tone.

"No . . ." The prisoner's voice was breathless. "Please don't make me do that. I'll do anything else that would please you. . . ."

Layle raised his eyebrows. "Such as lie on the rack? I assure you, it would give me great pleasure indeed to hear your joints pop out of their sockets."

The youth's face held such horror and sickness that Layle nearly laughed. He gestured toward his clothes, and after a moment the prisoner reached forward his shaking hands and undid the flap of Layle's trousers. He was nearly hit in the nose by Layle's shaft, which tumbled out eagerly, happy to be freed from confinement. The youth gave a yelp and drew back. Layle laughed and forced the prisoner's head forward again.

"Kiss them," he said in the voice of a strict schoolmaster issuing orders to his pupil.

The youth, innocent as he was, seemed momentarily puzzled by the plural of this instruction. Then his gaze fell slightly, and he swallowed.

"Please . . ." he whispered.

Layle let his hand tighten on the hair, and he heard the youth gasp. "The rack," he said in his deepest voice. "Or this. Make your choice."

His hands shaking again, the youth reached forward and pulled the shaft up out of the way; then he put forward his mouth. Layle smiled as he felt the youth's trembling lips touch him. There was in fact no choice; the prisoner would end up on the rack in the end. But the prisoner didn't know that.

The youth silently followed his instructions, using first his lips and then his tongue, working his way upward. Layle watched him, allowing his gaze to linger upon the prisoner's half-naked body, still shrouded by the tattered remains of his clothes. Layle had received a great deal of pleasure from tugging and tearing at those clothes, teasing at the youth's fear, moving his hands up and down the slender body but never trying to move the youth's hands, which had instinctively flown to protect the most vulnerable part of the body.

Now the youth's hands were following Layle's orders, tentatively stroking the softness between his legs as the youth's tongue worked its way higher. When the prisoner reached the tip he hesitated, looking up at his torturer.

Layle smiled back at him. Pleasure was coursing through his body now, and he knew that even greater pleasure lay ahead. He said, speaking the words he knew the youth feared, "I want it in your mouth, whore."

The youth looked at the object in front of him, as though trying to judge whether it was possible to fit it into the container proposed. In a quavering voice, he said, "How do I . . . ?"

It was always a delight to rape virgins; they were forced to reveal their ignorance in the most humiliating manner possible. Layle made the youth voice his question in the plainest terms possible; then he patiently supplied the youth with the answer. He went further in his instruction than he needed to; the youth began to struggle not to cry as he was told what to do when the shaft drove far into him. In reality, Layle had no intention of

going that far. Yet. It was always amusing to let prisoners think that they had been reprieved from the worst, so that their hopes would rise, only to be battered down at a later point.

Besides, Layle admitted to himself, he had a certain gentleness within himself which did not quite fit the image that the master who was training him held of him, of the perfect Vovimian torturer who would teach the other torturers how to break prisoners in the most merciless manner possible. Part of him yearned for something beyond that. . . .

Dimly, within his dreamings, Layle was aware that he had travelled past imaginings to memory. He closed his eyes momentarily, worried that the prisoner now sliding his lips onto Layle's shaft had taken on a different face. But when he looked down, the prisoner was the same beautiful young man as before.

The youth was beginning to cry now, and his tears added to Layle's desire. Layle had been resting his hand lightly against the back of the youth's head until now, preferring to watch the prisoner degrade himself of his own will, but now his hand tightened upon the head. The youth whimpered . . .

And immediately Layle was drawing back, away from the youth, away from the dreaming, back into the cell of the High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon.

Below him, the youth had his head bowed. Layle knelt down and placed his hand tentatively upon Elsdon's. His love-mate responded by leaning forward.

Layle embraced him, keeping his touch light. Elsdon was not shaking – that was a mercy, showing that Layle had not thrust the youth too far into his own memories. The young Seeker's body was tense, though. Layle inwardly cursed himself as he kissed Elsdon's hair and murmured, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Elsdon's voice was blessedly calm. "I was fine as long as you were just holding my head – it felt as though you were cradling it. But when you began to push . . . It was only a featherweight push. Next time I'll know that I can break free, and I won't be scared."

"There won't be a next time," said Layle, his voice muffled in Elsdon's hair. "Elsdon, this is madness. You've never gone beyond kisses, and I have you on your knees, servicing me as though you were a whore. Sweet blood, I can't keep from hurting you—"

Elsdon laughed and extracted himself easily from Layle's arms. "Love, do you have *any* idea what it's been like for me in bed these past three months, lying awake thinking of you? Even with my limited knowledge, I took us far beyond what we just did. Do you realize what pleasure it gives me to finally be able to touch you rather than myself?"

Layle reached forward to brush his fingers across Elsdon's lips, which had grown red and swollen with desire. Elsdon leaned into the caress, wrapping his lips around Layle's thumb and then sucking it suddenly into his mouth, as though taking a prisoner. He grinned around the thumb, but Layle's sober mood remained. Carefully removing his thumb, he said, "Be truthful. Did my orders upset you?"

Elsdon laughed again. "How could they? 'Kiss them.' 'Lick it.' Layle, those weren't orders; those were permissions for me to do what I wanted." He looked more carefully at Layle, and his expression grew more serious. He said quietly, "Did you speak more to me in your dreamings than you did aloud?"

"Yes." His throat constricted around the word.

"What did you say?"

Layle looked down at his hands; they were clenched into fists. He forced himself to relax but did not look up.

Elsdon sighed as he shifted to sit on the floor. "Love, can't you at least give me a hint of what you're dreaming?"

After a minute Layle said, "When you opened my trousers . . ."

"And nearly got hit in the nose, and we both laughed. Yes?"

Layle raised his eyes to where his love-mate was smiling. "In the dreaming, you didn't laugh."

The smile faded. After a moment Elsdon reached forward and drew Layle into his embrace. Layle shifted so that his back was against Elsdon's chest. He felt Elsdon nuzzle his neck through the hood-cloth.

"All right," Elsdon said after a while. "I can see why this must be hard for you. But truly, Layle, you're doing a wonderful job of translating your dreamings into lovemaking. I wouldn't have guessed if you hadn't told me. Your voice is patient, your touch gentle, your expression affectionate. Am I really supplying anything to your dreamings, or is your mind completely off in another world, leaving your body here to function by whatever commands you've left it?"

Layle shook his head. "My dear, it's hard to describe. I feel as though I've entered into something akin to madness. Of course the dreamings have been with me for years, and they've seemed so real to me that they've frightened me sometimes. I spoke to Mr. Bergsen about them when I first began to have the dreamings, soon after I arrived at this dungeon, and he said that I have the same sort of power as a small child, to place myself within the imaginary. He thought that power might do me good in my work, since it would allow me to enter more deeply into whatever life-tales the prisoners told me. But this . . ."

He turned within Elsdon's arms to look back at the other Seeker. Beyond Elsdon lay the familiar surroundings of the bedroom Layle had occupied since being appointed High Seeker. Aside from a cupboard that held the chamber-pot, there was little in the room: a night-table, a clothes-chest, lamps, and a bed. The bed, in accordance with his seniority, was designed for two. No one had yet used it besides himself.

"You're there in the dreamings," he said slowly. "And you're yourself, but you're a self that's never existed. You're what you might have become if your father had broken your spirit entirely. Only I'm the one doing the breaking—"

He stopped, realizing, too late, that he had evoked the man who must be barred from this room. He felt the tremble go through Elsdon's body, and he turned swiftly, pulling Elsdon into his arms. He kissed the young Seeker's head and said softly, "We're finished. No more of this."

"No." Elsdon's voice was not that of a youth protesting an elder's decision; rather, it was that of a Seeker disagreeing with a colleague. "Layle, you don't understand . . . I didn't understand until a short while ago, when you began. I once thought that the way for me to heal was for me to go to bed with someone who was utterly unlike my father. That's why I was so horrified to learn of your likeness to him. But now I realize that I need someone who is *like* my father: someone who shares my father's pleasure at pain, but who uses that pleasure only to bring gentle delight to those he loves. That's the only way I'll be able to reconcile the mixture of love and hatred I feel for my father – to recognize that he was not an evil man for feeling pleasure at pain but for inflicting that pain."

Layle was silent, his mouth resting upon Elsdon's hair. Then he said in a muffled voice, "During my early years in the Eternal Dungeon, before I realized the unlikelihood of this happening, I held hope that I could find another Seeker who enjoyed having pain inflicted upon him, so that I could rouse both our desires that way. I came to believe even that would be wrong."

Elsdon shook his head. "That's different from what I'm talking about; you know that. You wouldn't hurt anyone purely for the sake of your own pleasure; everything you've done in your life shows that."

Again he felt the piercing pain of his conscience; he should speak now, he knew. He imagined himself saying, "Let me tell you what I was dreaming, and let me explain which parts of it were drawn from memory. . . ." He closed his eyes, his throat tightening.

"You were talking about your dreamings," said Elsdon.

It took him a full minute to speak. Elsdon remained quiet in his arms during that time, warm and solid. Sweet blood, he hadn't touched a naked body in seventeen years, and never had he touched anyone this way. The highest hopes of his youth had not imagined such joy for him. How could he chance losing this? Especially since few other people in this place knew the full truth. He had told only the Queen, and the Queen had not considered it necessary for most others to know the facts of his past. If she did not consider it necessary . . .

"The words you speak in the dreaming are my own imagining," Layle said as he let his fingers trace their way across Elsdon's face, "but some of your gestures and touchings are what you are doing here, and some of how I speak to you and touch you are from this world. I combine that world and this—"

"Like a painter combining colors. Yes, I see." Elsdon nibbled at Layle's hand for a moment before saying, "Does that make it harder for you or easier?"

"In terms of desire, it makes it easier. I've never had a dreaming before that aroused me so strongly. In terms of my conscience . . . I don't know. Elsdon, I'm still having difficulty with the idea that even allowing you into this bedroom is right. But you say that it helps you."

"Yes." Elsdon's voice was soft. "It does. It's as though you're cutting the bindings around me slowly, rope by rope. I know that you have the ability to do what my father did to me, and instead you give me love. Layle, I can't tell you what a difference that makes to me."

"Well, then . . ." Layle bent his head, trying to think. "Next time we should talk first about what we're going to do—"

"Next time!" Elsdon squirmed around in Layle's arms. "High Seeker, you must be mocking! You're not going to leave me like *this*!"

Layle craned his neck to look, wondering whether what he saw was another dreaming. "Bloody blades," he said weakly. "The vitality of youth. Have you been that way the whole time we've been talking?"

Elsdon laughed. "Well, up or down, depending on whether we were talking about my father. But I don't lose hope. At least, that part of me doesn't."

"Ah. Well." Layle looked down at his lap. He had left his youth behind, as the evidence showed. "I'm sure I can manage to work my way back. This time, though, I do the kneeling."

"Layle, you couldn't possibly—"

"Yes, I can," he said, leaning forward to silence Elsdon with a kiss. "I've been dreaming for seventeen years. Believe me, I can find a dreaming for

any position we choose."

CHAPTER TWO

A quarter of an hour later – after he and Elsdon had debated engineering problems with the same gravity that Layle usually reserved for determining how the layout of the Inner Dungeon should be altered for the prisoners' comfort – Elsdon was standing on two stools. This was something of an achievement, given the lowness of the bedroom ceiling. Elsdon was only able to manage it by leaning forward, keeping his balance by placing his hands behind him onto the man-high head of the bed, which had been pulled out from the wall to provide this support. At Layle's suggestion, Elsdon had folded one of his hands over the other.

The stools were far enough apart to allow room under Elsdon's groin for a man. Layle, examining their spacing critically, said, "Try moving your legs further apart."

Elsdon did so, saying, "Layle, I hope you don't have in mind anything involving a feather, because I'm on the point of dying of laughter."

Layle smiled up at him, saying, "The man who trained me said that intricate positions always look peculiar to the uneducated eye. He said that this applied to both sex and torture."

"I'm not going to ask what the connection is here." Elsdon peered down toward the floor, his hair falling into his eyes. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Just what you're doing. Are you getting cramped?"

"Not at all. You look as though you're in a less comfortable position."

"No," Layle said softly from where he knelt between the stools, his back upright. "I'm not in this position in the dreaming."

There was no reply. He turned his attention to the thighs that were parted as though the space between them was a mountain-peak. The golden hair on them shone bright against the ivory skin; he reached out and trailed his finger softly over the hair. From above came a moan that caused his heart to beat faster. He trickled his fingers lightly through the hair, taking care not to tickle, though the moans assured him that there was little danger of

laughter now. Reaching higher, he touched the front of the thighs, where the flesh remained mangled from the scrape of the claw.

The moans turned into a weak scream. He stepped back, savoring the sight before him. His master had always said that the positions he found for his prisoners were more creative than that of a high-class courtesan.

The position the youth was in was simple enough and would have been unlikely to cause stares from any of the other torturers who happened to wander in. He lingered on that thought a moment, wondering whether he should invite his master to join him in his pleasure, but he decided that he didn't have time enough for that. This was the third day of torture, and the prisoner was growing weak.

The confession – ostensibly the real reason for this searching – had been obtained a short time before, when he had pulled the youth up by the pulley. He hadn't even needed to add weights to the feet or to drop the prisoner with a jerk, so the prisoner's arm sockets remained intact. At least, he thought they did; taking a second look at where the youth hung, with his arms bound behind his back to the pulley, Layle had some doubts. He hoped that the youth's body was still whole. Despite what he had said to the prisoner earlier, he actually disliked mutilated bodies, and he had only cut into the youth's delicate flesh with the claw because his master had ordered him to. He disliked a great many things his master had him do. Some day he would leave this place and . . .

He shook his head, aware that he was perilously close again to his memories, and returned his attention to the prisoner. Though there were no weights upon the prisoner's feet, each leg had been bound separately and pulled apart so that there was space enough for Layle to walk beneath the legs, provided he ducked his head a bit. It was an interesting position: arms parallel to the ground, torso dangling at an angle from the arms, the legs pulled into a V shape . . .

Above him, he could hear that the youth had returned to his hoarse crying. "Please," the prisoner whispered. "Oh please, oh please, oh please. Letmedieletmedieletmedie—"

"Certainly not," said Layle coolly. "I wouldn't think of releasing you from your pain until I'd given you your pleasure, slattern." He reached up and

tore the last of the youth's clothes from his body.

What he saw pleased him. The youth was already hard – severe pain could sometimes do that. He trailed his hand over the shaft and heard the youth give a weak whimper. The prisoner had been fearing this moment for three days, but now that it had finally occurred, he barely had enough consciousness left to appreciate it.

That was something of a disappointment. Layle frowned, then decided to take the matter one step at a time. He mustn't put this position to waste. He ducked his head and began nibbling his way slowly under and over and around the delectable meal before him.

The whimpers above were growing stronger; his own desire waxed enough that he took hold of himself, then quickly released himself. Patience, he thought. If he went too swiftly, he'd have nothing left over for the next stage. He must hold himself back.

The prisoner exerted no such control over himself. He was beginning to thrash in the air now – quite an achievement, given his position. Layle hoped the youth wouldn't move in such a way that those shoulders were dislocated after all. He took hold of the mauled thighs, causing the youth to scream. At the moment of his screaming, his shaft began to pulse in Layle's mouth. Only brothel-boys allowed themselves to become the receptacles for men's seed; Layle stepped back hastily, using his hand to bring matters to completion.

He looked up. The prisoner was hanging limp as a corpse. This was unfortunate; the image might be more than metaphorical. He gave the youth's leg a tug and was gratified to hear a groan. Good. The next thing to do was to bring the prisoner down from where he was.

Layle did so slowly, first untying the legs, then gently moving the pulley wheel until the prisoner's feet touched the floor. The youth was still limp; he seemed not to notice that he was on the ground again. Layle frowned once more; he had no interest in raping an unconscious body. He decided that a change of tactics was in order.

He moved forward and wrapped one arm around the youth's waist while his free hand released the wrists from the pulley. As the constrained arms

sprang free, the youth gave a loud groan and began to sob again.

"Shhh." Layle carefully helped the youth down onto the cold floor; the youth ended up on his stomach, his arms too limp to move. He was still crying. Layle sat down beside him and stroked his hair. "Shh, my dear, it's all right. It's all over now."

"Don't hurt me," the youth sobbed.

It was touching. Despite himself, Layle found himself reaching down to kiss the prisoner's hair. The hair was filthy, of course. Layle let his hand trail over the skin that was clotted with dried sweat and blood as he said in a soothing voice, "I told you, it's all over. I have your confession. You won't be tortured any more."

The youth had kept his eyelids clamped shut during this exchange. Now he raised them, and Layle could see that his eyes were awash with tears. "Are you going to kill me?" he whispered.

There was fear in his voice. Layle had seen this many times before. One moment a prisoner would be screaming for death; the next moment the prisoner would see death coming and would start screaming for life.

"Of course not," Layle said softly, smiling at the youth. "I'm a torturer, not an executioner. And in any case . . ." He let his hands trail over the body again. "I'm tempted to pretend I found that you were innocent. You're far too beautiful to face the executioner."

The youth lay motionless. Tears still spilled out of his eyes, but his gaze was filled with uncertainty. Finally he whispered, "I *am* innocent. I only said I was guilty so that you would stop the torture."

"Yes, I can see that now." He was able to make his voice sound convincing. For all he knew, the youth might be telling the truth. Whether a prisoner was guilty or innocent was of no importance to Vovim's King; the King wanted confessions, and that was what the Vovimian torturers supplied him with. It had always stung at Layle's sense of professionalism; he instinctively felt that he wasn't doing his best work in this kingdom. He had heard rumors that matters were handled differently in Yclau . . .

He had to look away a moment to steady himself. When he looked back, the youth was still where he had been, lying on his stomach. His back was deeply gouged from the beatings Layle had given him, especially upon his backside. Layle felt himself grow painfully hard at the sight. He trailed his hand over one of the runnels in the flesh, saying, "Does this hurt?"

"No." The youth's lie was brave; he was screwing up his face in his effort not to cry out.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." The youth's voice was choked.

"Tell me if I hurt you," Layle said softly. "I just want to check your injuries." He leaned over, as though to inspect the body, and began to bring his weight down upon the youth.

The youth screamed. Layle rolled off him immediately. He had not moved so fast since the day he had ordered a guard to take a prisoner up to level one on the machine, and the prisoner's agonized scream had alerted him to the fact that something was seriously the matter with the rack – the prisoner was being torn apart as he watched.

On that occasion, Layle had raced as far as the wheel, wrenching it back down to free the prisoner from his torment. Now he moved a smaller space, rolling to the side of the bed.

He hardly dared move after that. He hardly dared breathe. Elsdon was as he had left him, on his stomach on the bed, shuddering like a prisoner who has just endured a hard whipping. After a minute more, during which Layle wondered whether the best thing he could do for the youth would be to borrow a guard's dagger and slit his own throat, Layle finally asked in a low voice, "Shall I call the healer?"

Elsdon shook his head. Tears were beginning to streak down his face. "Hold me, please," he said in a choked voice.

Carefully, delicately, Layle sat up and pulled Elsdon into his arms. The other man burrowed his face into Layle's chest, his mouth moving in an instinctive kiss. Layle softly stroked the young Seeker, taking care not to

stray near the deep gouges in his backside where Elsdon's father had often beaten him.

Elsdon's breath began to steady; the tears stopped dripping onto Layle's chest. At least he could do that much for his love-mate, Layle thought, looking down at the youth. Like a torturer who comforts his victim after the torment.

The pain that accompanied that thought was so great that a groan escaped his throat. Elsdon lifted his head instantly. His gaze flicked over Layle's face, and then he said in a shaky voice, "It's not your fault."

Of course those would be the first words he spoke. He'd probably spoken those words to his father. Layle turned his head away, wishing that his face-cloth was lowered to hide his expression from the Seeker he held.

Elsdon turned round in his arms, taking hold of his shoulders. "Layle, stop! I tell you, it's not your fault!"

"Then whose is it?" So great was his self-loathing now that it transformed itself into anger. "Did a rat run over your back? Or did your father wander in? Or perhaps you made the mistake of going to bed with a foreign torturer!"

Elsdon stared at him blankly; then comprehension entered his eyes. "Oh," he said softly, reaching his hand out to brush back the hair from Layle's forehead. "That's what this is about? Layle, whatever you did in your youth is over. You were not at fault for that either."

"Not at fault." The words were bitter in his mouth.

"Of course not. You followed the orders you were given at whichever of our queendom's lesser prison you worked at – Blackstone Prison, wasn't it called? I don't suppose you even knew that the *Code of Seeking* existed. In that respect, you might just as well have been one of those barbarian Vovimian torturers. But for love of the Code, Layle, it wasn't that bad. You were following the civilized laws of Yclau, not tearing prisoners apart without mercy like the Vovimians do. Whatever mistakes you made at your old position, you weren't a brute. And for the past seventeen years you've worked in a dungeon where every Seeker is willing to suffer for the

sake of the prisoners. The past is dead." He leaned forward and kissed Layle.

For a guilty prisoner to be able to forgive himself, the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking* read, *he must first confess to his guilt.* Layle had written those words himself. Time after time he had seen how confession of a crime refreshed the spirit of a prisoner and made it possible for him to face with strength and courage the consequences of his crime. It had happened to Elsdon; it would happen to Layle too if he confessed to Elsdon now.

But the price of that confession would be Elsdon's pain. Perhaps it would have been possible to tell Elsdon before the first kiss, but in preparation for his training, Elsdon had read the books about Vovimian methods of torture. If Layle confessed, Elsdon would immediately realize what the High Seeker had been doing here – would know that Layle had been taking his past evils and attempting to recreate them in the present through Elsdon's body and soul. And what would that do to Elsdon, who screamed in fear when Layle did nothing more than lie atop him?

Layle struggled to bring himself back under control. Elsdon was the one doing the comforting, which was absurd. He placed his hand over Elsdon's and said quietly, "My dear, it was worth the effort, but we can see that this won't work. The pain in you lies too deep; we must find other ways to heal it. And you must believe me when I say that simply having you in my arms is enough joy to last me till my death. I don't need anything more."

Elsdon gave a heavy sigh. "Layle, I don't doubt that. You know the same is true for me. But you're not listening to me – I'm telling you, you're not at fault. What happened was an accident; it wouldn't have happened if I'd been prepared."

"For me to have touched you where your father beat you—"

"No, it wasn't that. You asked me beforehand whether it hurt me when you touched me there – you asked me twice. It wasn't my backside being touched that made me afraid. It was your weight. I've never had anyone atop me before; I didn't know that it would feel so much like being bound."

Layle let his hands stroke Elsdon's arms for a long while before he looked up and said, "My error – my grievous error. When you lay down on your stomach afterwards and looked back at me, smiling, I thought you wanted —"

"It *was* what I wanted. It was in all my dreamings about us. But I hadn't known the details of how it would work; I hadn't been sure which angle you would be approaching me from." He cocked his head, and a smile crept onto his face. "You said you had a dreaming for every position. Do you have a position for every dreaming?"

Layle drew in a vast lungful of air. "Elsdon, this is madness."

"So you keep saying. Shall we be mad together?"

Layle did not smile. Elsdon sighed and placed his arms around Layle, saying, "I heard a story about a malfunctioning rack that a prisoner was rescued from only by the quick reflexes of the High Seeker. Is that true?"

"There have been several malfunctioning racks since my arrival at the Eternal Dungeon. They always seem to break when I come near them."

"And this prisoner – he must have been frightened."

"Very much so. I'd told him the truth, that Yclau racks were designed to increase tension and fear, but that the rack would not cause him permanent injury. And then I placed him on a rack that acted as though it had been made in Vovim."

"But he wasn't permanently injured."

"No, thankfully."

Elsdon cocked his head again. "So I suppose you gave up searching him then. After all, you'd badly frightened him and might have caused him grave harm. The obvious thing to do would have been to abandon the searching and let him sort out his problems by less dangerous methods."

There was a moment of silence, and then Layle began to curse under his breath. Elsdon smiled.

CHAPTER THREE

An hour's delay ensued; the first three-quarters of the hour was for the argument, while the fourth quarter was for another engineering discussion. The latter was all the more heated for Layle's lingering uncertainty, but they finally reached the moment when Elsdon was lying on his back on a cushioned bench in the sitting room.

The bench had been too low initially. Layle cast a dubious look at the books raising the bench's height and said, "I don't like this. I have visions of you tumbling, bench and all, once we get vigorous."

"That's not my worry," said Elsdon, waving his legs in the air. "What am I supposed to do with these? I'll get tired holding them up like this."

"You can rest them on my shoulders in a short while," Layle assured him.

Elsdon gave a hoot of laughter and nearly rolled off the narrow bench. "Layle, I couldn't possibly! Not on my first time; I'd die laughing."

"Well," said Layle, looking down at the books on torture methodology that supported the bench, "I refuse to make love to a corpse, so I suppose we need to find another solution."

It took another engineering consultation before two chests were pulled up to the right and left of where Layle stood, at the end of the bench. Elsdon placed his feet experimentally upon the cushions piled upon the chests, then nodded. "This will work," he declared.

"As though you have any idea whether it would work, inexperienced one." Layle ran a critical eye over the arrangement before nodding his approval. "We'll probably have to make adjustments once we start, but I think we're ready n— Oh, bloody blades!" He darted off in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Elsdon to watch his departure with bemusement.

Two-quarters of an hour later, the apartment looked as though it had been pillaged by the Vovimians. Baskets in the kitchen had been upturned and sorted through, objects had been flung from chests, and shelves had been swept clean of their belongings. Layle stood in the middle of the sitting room, running his hands through the hair under the back of his hood and casting frantic looks at every corner of the room. He glanced

unenthusiastically toward the door leading to the corridors of the outer dungeon, but even there lay no hope: it was past midnight, so the only dungeon dwellers who were still awake were the Seekers and guards who were busy on the night shift.

Elsdon, who had been watching with increasing curiosity, asked, "Can't we proceed without whatever it is?"

Layle shook his head. "This is your first time; I can't take the chance. Bloody blades!" He shouted the words to the ceiling, heedless of waking nearby dungeon dwellers. "I can't believe this is happening. Look at this place!"

He cast his arms wide, and Elsdon obediently looked about at the chaos that Layle had created. "I have the most well-equipped quarters in the dungeon," Layle said in a tight voice. "I have dozens of examples of antique torture devices in my chests. I have hundreds of books on my shelves describing how to break prisoners. And I have . . . no . . . bloody . . . *oil*."

"Oil?" said Elsdon with interest. "Is that what you're looking for? It's in my pocket."

Layle turned his head to look at the Seeker-in-Training, who was sitting quietly upon the bench. "What?" the High Seeker said weakly.

Elsdon smiled and pointed toward the bedroom, where clothes lay scattered around the chest Layle had emptied there.

It took a minute for Layle to locate Elsdon's trousers amidst the wrack upon the ground; then he spent another minute contemplating what he had found. Finally he walked over to the bedroom doorway and leaned against the doorpost, holding up the vial of violet liquid.

"Young virgin," he said in the level voice he usually reserved for especially difficult prisoners, "would you mind telling me why you are carrying around a vial of lovemaking lubricant?"

Elsdon's smile turned to a grin. "It's for you, of course. I've been carrying it since the day you first admitted you loved me. I forgot to remove it from my pocket when I got angry at you." He hesitated as Layle held the vial up

toward the lamplight. "Is it all right? Garrett gave it to me. It's the kind he uses with his love-mate."

Layle looked back at Elsdon. "It will do very well indeed. And I think you've just completed the first part of your training, which is to be sure that you always have the proper equipment at hand before you start your work."

He walked over and set the vial carefully down upon one of the chests before him. Elsdon was already lying on his back by the time Layle reached him. Though the youth was trying to remain sober, a smile kept creeping through. Layle examined Elsdon's face for a moment more, and then, through long experience in reading prisoners' faces, said in a matter-of-fact tone, "Frightened?"

Elsdon's smile didn't waver. "A bit."

Layle retreated around the chests and came over to kneel next to the youth. "Don't be," he said softly. "I won't hurt you." He reached out to touch the golden-brown locks.

The youth turned his head to look at Layle. He was breathing hard – this was hardly surprising, given that he was lying upon his back. Layle wondered briefly whether he should have positioned the youth on his stomach, but the claw had damaged the front of the thighs too much for that. He let his hand trickle down the prisoner's cheek.

He saw the fear deepen within the youth's eyes, and he quickly withdrew his hand. "I'm sorry," he said.

The youth's expression remained fearful, but his eyes had grown uncertain again.

"Not about the torture," Layle clarified. "That was my duty. But about the rest of it. The truth is, when they brought you in originally, my first thought was, 'This is the most beautiful young man in the world.' I'm afraid I lost control of myself after that."

There was a silence, but for the heavy breath of the youth and the sound of screams and pleading in nearby cells. Then the prisoner whispered, "You think I'm beautiful?"

"Of course you are," said Layle, stroking the youth's forehead in what he hoped was a nonthreatening manner. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that?"

The youth was silent a moment before saying, "A boy in school said I was. I thought he was joking."

"You have a beautiful face, a beautiful body . . . and a beautiful soul to match them."

The youth bit his lip. "My backside isn't beautiful any more," he said.

"That is part of your beautiful soul. It's a visible mark of your courage."

The prisoner continued to stare at him, his eyes wide with eagerness to believe that the words were true. Layle leaned forward to kiss the prisoner lightly upon the forehead, closing his eyes at a momentary stab of pain within him. All of this loving talk came far too easily to him, easier even than his talk of "whore" and "slattern." This gentleness touched too closely to a hope that he had been forced to imprison two years before, when he had discovered the limitations on what he could be.

He had just turned sixteen when his master, to celebrate the completion of his first year as one of the King's Torturers, had taken him on a trip into town – a sign of his master's faith in him, for while trusted members of the dungeon such as his master were sometimes allowed a few hours away from the dungeon that was their life-long home, apprentices almost never were. In Layle's case, though, the thought of fleeing the dungeon had never occurred to him. Why should he leave the perfect place of employment?

And so his master had taken him to a brothel. Layle was not anywhere near to a virgin by that point, of course – his training as a torturer had been thorough – but he was still curious to know what lovemaking was like, and how it differed from rape.

He did not learn that night, nor on any of the nights that followed as he stubbornly and systematically made his way through all the women's brothels in town, then through all the boys' brothels. He had even gone so far as to take the trouble to court a well-born young woman, so that he could seduce her into his bed.

And everywhere he had met with failure. Even the seduction of the young woman had not raised his desire; there was something about her freedom, her lack of binding, that made his body rebel. He wondered sometimes if he had been born this way, or if his life would have been different if he hadn't taken up torturing at such a young age. Perhaps the first year at his career had set his sexuality, like mortar turning hard.

His master, whose sympathy had extended so far as to buy Layle a night with a high-class courtesan, had finally patted him on the shoulder and said, "Well, my dear, we can't always have what we want in life. But I can promise you this: you'll never lack for sexual partners in this profession."

Of course this had been true, and Layle had tried to set his mind back to the prisoners who provided him with an endless round of bodily delights. But his mind, it turned out, was less satisfied, and part of it continued to cry out for more, though he had ruthlessly imprisoned this part of him so that it would not damage his work.

Now he found himself sighing, but the reality of what he was couldn't be changed. It was sweet to be able to kiss the prisoner softly and feel the other youth's fingers curl trustfully around his, but he could do this all night and his body would not respond. So he allowed his gaze to wander over to the marks of what he had done to the prisoner.

He could see clearly the body, for it was lying now upon the rack. He had not bothered to strap down the youth, for the prisoner remained too weak to fight him. Besides, he wanted the youth to have the illusion of being free. There were few signs of torture on the front of the body; that had been a deliberate decision by Layle, reflecting his distaste of mutilation. But the body was limp and unresisting, just as it should be. The legs were spread apart, with a gap between them that the rack mirrored. The lower halves of Vovimian racks were designed to provide access between the legs of prisoners, though it took slower-minded prisoners a while to figure out why.

Certainly this prisoner showed no sign of curiosity as to why Layle had laid him upon the cold metal of the rack rather than onto one of the nearby wooden tables. Layle leaned over to kiss the fingers curled loosely around his, saying, "I know I was wrong to take you the way I did, by force. But I

couldn't think of any other way to do it. I knew that someone as beautiful as you wouldn't be interested in someone like me."

He dared not look at the youth now; he had never trained himself to school the expression on his face, since he had not wanted to hide his feelings from any of the prisoners, except at moments such as this. After a few seconds he heard the youth whisper, "It might have been different . . . if we . . ."

"If we'd met differently?" Layle kissed the fingers again. "It's generous of you to say that, but I know you're just being kind to me. You're so beautiful; you could have anyone you choose. You certainly wouldn't want to give your love to a vile, ugly torturer."

"You're not ugly." The reply was so swift that Layle had to cover his mouth to hide his smile. More hesitantly, the prisoner said, "You said you'd arrange for my release. If we met again . . ."

Layle shook his head. "I'm not permitted to leave this dungeon. It's part of the rules here – it's supposed to help us feel empathy with the prisoners." This was the first story he had heard about the Eternal Dungeon. Since that time, a year ago, he had been collecting all the information he could about Yclau's odd dungeon. He set that thought aside; it increased his uneasiness. "We'll never meet again after tonight. I'm sorry about that, for my sake. But you're better off not knowing someone like me." He let his cheek rest upon the prisoner's hand, feeling again the pain at his awareness that this type of talk came so easily to him. If his life had been different . . .

Next to him, the youth continued to give hard, labored breaths. Then he said in a small voice, "You could make love to me now."

Layle's breath hissed in with triumph; he hoped it sounded like surprise. He took the chance and turned his head – it was dark in the rack room, which was lit only by the branding fire. "My dear, you're far too generous," he said honestly. "But even if I didn't know that you were making this offer out of charity to me, it's just not possible. Your wounds are too deep. I'd only increase your pain."

"No, truly, you wouldn't." He could hear the mixture of fear and growing eagerness in the youth's voice. "It would . . . it would help with my healing. Having you give me love rather than pain."

He bowed his head, as though trying to hold back from temptation. The youth's voice rose another notch. "Please . . . If nothing else, it would take my mind off the pain."

"If you're sure," he said softly.

"Yes." The prisoner's voice wavered, but Layle pretended not to notice. He leaned over and kissed the youth lightly, this time on the lips.

"I'll be gentle, I promise," he told the prisoner. "I won't hurt you again."

A look of anxiety travelled onto the prisoner's face – he had obviously not thought about this aspect of the matter – but Layle leaned forward and kissed him once more, this time deeply, though slowly. He had a precise sense of timing as a torturer; it was one of the things that caused his master to have high hopes for him. Now his eyes were turned toward the other end of the prisoner's body, awaiting the signal he needed that he should begin.

The signal came. He pulled back with a sigh and said, "By the torture-god of hell, you're too much for me. I can't believe that you're letting me do this."

The faintest of smiles travelled onto the youth's face. "This is my first time," he confided.

"Then I'll take special care." He rose slowly, using unhurried movements to contrast with his earlier abrupt gestures. He did not want anything about what he did to remind the prisoner of the youth who had tortured him before.

Yet.

He hesitated when picking up the vial he had set aside on the rack, but the prisoner – obviously not the most quick-witted person to have passed through Vovim's Hidden Dungeon – showed no signs of curiosity as to why such an item was waiting. Layle carefully spread the oil over both his

hands; his refusal to dry-rape prisoners with instruments of torture had earned him much good-natured ribbing from the other torturers. Then he set to work on the rising flesh before him.

He had hoped that the prisoner would associate his earlier rape only with Layle's mouth, not with his hands, and this appeared to be the case. He could hear the youth's breath increasing, and soon the moans began. Layle, wishing yet again that he could raise his own desire in so simple a manner, turned his mind away from the present scene, toward the near past and the near future. He did so lightly, concentrating the greater part of attention on what he was doing. That was another thing which marked him off from the other torturers – his willingness to pull back from his desires when they came into conflict with his work. His master, in a moment of utter honesty, had once told him that Layle's skills were such that he was wasted on his present work.

He knew this to be the case; he knew this all too well to be the case. What had once been the height of his joy – that he should work in this dungeon that shifted from hiding place to hiding place – had become stale to him. But when he thought of the alternative – to work at one of the foreign dungeons where he would be forever restricted and confined by senseless regulations – he knew that the only place for him was here, in Blackstone Prison, as Vovim's Hidden Dungeon was called in its current incarnation. Only here could he show true creativity.

His mind, all this while, had not strayed from the prisoner. Responding to the signals he was being given, he let his left hand wander down. His index finger began to push gently.

Immediately he felt the tension in the youth's body, and he paused. "Shh," he said. "I told you, it won't hurt, not unless you remain tense. You must try to relax."

"All right," the youth whispered.

The prisoner was obviously trying his best, but he could not fully obey the order he had been given. A moment later he flinched, and Layle quickly withdrew his finger. "You're not ready," he said quietly. "It's all right, some people need more time than others to prepare themselves for this. You need to wait till you're a bit older."

"But I want the first time to be tonight!" the youth protested. "I want you to make love to me!"

He had to close his eyes against the strange mixture of feelings: desire arising from sadistic triumph, as well as pain arising from sorrow that none of what was taking place was real. He was not doing as good a job of controlling himself with this prisoner as he usually did; he had noticed that since the first day. His mind kept wandering away to other matters . . .

He continued to stroke the youth slowly, saying, "There will be others. Don't set your heart too much on one person; you might end up being betrayed someday."

"I can relax," the youth whispered. "Please. Try again."

He proceeded carefully, timing his hands' work with the same precision he used when timing how long to keep a prisoner on each level of the rack. Even so, he mistimed the youth's eagerness, and there was an unfortunate pausing point at which he wondered whether he would have to reveal this seduction for the rape it was. But the youth insisted that he wanted to continue, and the youth's body – amazingly resilient after three days of torture – chimed in its opinion on the matter. Layle started again, taking greater care this time to keep the youth's state of desire low at the beginning.

His own state of desire was something of a problem. It would have helped, he decided, if he had bound the prisoner, but he did not want to change course at this point. "I want to hold your hand," he said softly. "Do you think you could take care of this part of the matter for me?"

He held no expectation that the youth's arms were yet strong enough to be lifted, but once again the prisoner's body defied his prognosis, and the youth's hand closed in upon where Layle's had been working. Layle let his right hand drift down to where the youth's free hand lay limp upon the rack. He placed his hand gently over the youth's, then carefully, unobtrusively worked his way up until his hand was encircling the prisoner's wrist. The youth, concentrating on what Layle was doing with his left hand, failed to notice.

Layle let his hand tighten suddenly on the wrist, as though he had been hit by a wave of desire, and the youth, in a quite satisfactory manner, began to writhe with passion, his body pinned down on one side by Layle's grip. Layle allowed himself to linger upon the image of the trapped prisoner for a while; finally he was ready.

The youth was too. Layle encountered no troubles until he was full in, at which point the youth gave a surprised yelp and jerked on the rack.

"Did I hurt you?" Layle asked gently, feeling himself throb at the thought.

"No, it feels *good*! Is it supposed to feel that way?"

He stared at the youth, momentarily disconcerted. "Didn't you expect to enjoy this?"

"Not that way. I didn't think it would feel nice when you were inside."

"But then . . ." His mind was awhirl; he had not encountered anything like this before. "Why did you let me do this?"

The youth smiled at him shyly. "I knew you'd enjoy it. I was looking forward to that."

The pain washed over him at once, crashing in great waves against him, over and over. He felt his grip tighten upon the youth. He struggled to break free of what he was feeling, but he only encountered worse: turning away in his mind, he saw suddenly the hope he had imprisoned. It was unshackled and looked upon him with grave eyes. The escaped prisoner held up a black book and said softly, "A torturer must be willing to suffer for the prisoners."

He knew the words. He had read them three days ago, shortly before the youth's arrival, when he had finally succeeded in obtaining a black-market copy of the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking*.

He had read the book all through the night, sometimes laughing at the absurdity of what he read, sometimes feeling his heart thump as though he had encountered an unexpected danger. It was like reading about a dungeon where the torturers had gone mad. None of the rules made sense;

none of the regulations were designed to help a torturer deprive and degrade and destroy a prisoner.

Break a prisoner, yes. The word "breaking" was used in the book, and methods of torture – albeit extremely limited – were described in the *Code of Seeking*. Yet even here the obvious was turned topsy-turvy: the object of breaking was not to destroy the prisoner, but to give him rebirth. It was an image strange to him, for he had lived all his life in a land where the hell-god tortured his prisoners for eternity. Here in this book was a dungeon that claimed to be eternal, yet claimed that a time came when the prisoners' pain was transformed into joy.

For three days he had been trying to still his mind, to keep his thoughts focussed on his work. And now the hope he had imprisoned stood before him, waiting.

The youth was waiting too. He was beginning to show concern that Layle had been silent for so long. In an automatic manner, Layle picked up the youth's hand and kissed it. "I'm glad I can give you pleasure," he said in a low voice. "There's no one who deserves it more."

The youth's smile increased. He was evidently losing all awareness of the pain that must still be coursing through him. Layle let his hands wander over the youth's body, carefully avoiding the points of damage as he increased the youth's arousal. It would not be long now, for either of them. Layle's rhythm increased, and his breath grew hard. He closed his eyes, striving to push back his own pain and the hope that had brought it. His work, he thought; he must concentrate his mind on his work, and on the final duty he must fulfill with this prisoner.

His hands wandered higher. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the youth was aware of the touching and was smiling from it, his expression now dazed from the passion travelling through him. Layle could feel the passion spreading in waves of shivers through the youth's body. Layle's heartbeat increased; the surge of the upcoming wave of desire began to build within him. His hands crept higher and touched the youth's neck.

He knew the exact moment at which the youth realized the betrayal. It came as it always did, with a sudden break in the prisoner's smile, as though a mirror had been shattered. There was a moment during which the

youth looked stunned, as though he had been hit on the head. Layle's hands tightened upon the youth's neck, waiting for the scream.

It did not come. Instead, the youth's expression cleared. He looked upon Layle with the eyes of Layle's gentle hope, and he said quietly, "Don't do this."

In the next moment, the wave hit Layle. His hands tightened, through long custom, upon the soft flesh of the neck; he heard the prisoner's breathing stop and the body begin to flail in a useless attempt to escape death. He had no time to wonder whether the youth would use his hands to try to push his executioner back. Wave after wave hit Layle, the pleasure drowning him.

And then suddenly it was gone – every drop of pleasure disappeared. He cried out, his body continuing to pound the youth as though it had not noticed the loss. He felt someone grip him, and he knew without having to look that it was the prisoner, who had escaped.

He heard the hope he had striven to keep captive say softly, "You will not do this. You will leave this place and go to Yclau. There you will ask for sanctuary and request to work in the Eternal Dungeon. You will give up all that you have here: your freedom, your independence, your rapes. Never again will you spend your passion on a prisoner; that is forever gone from your life. Never again will you torture a prisoner to bring pleasure to yourself. Instead, you will take your skills and use them to bring rebirth to others. You will suffer for the prisoners."

His cry of agony filled the cell. He felt his hands slip from the youth's neck, and in the next moment he heard the youth's hard rasping as he struggled his way back to breath and life. Layle was sobbing now, his desire waning for what he now knew would be the last time. Any passion he had in the future would be an act of solitude. He would be alone forever, giving to the prisoners and taking nothing in return. His dark desire was imprisoned.

Within him, he heard the echo of its screams of rage.

Shaking now, barely able to stand on his feet, he caught hold of the youth and heard the young man's intake of breath. Barely aware of what he was

doing, he scooped the youth into his arms. The youth was limp, unresisting. Layle carried him into the next room, then laid him down. The youth's eyes were open now, looking up at him. Still shaking, Layle lay down beside the youth and put his arms around him.

"I love you," he said in a broken voice. "I love you, I love you."

"Shhh." The voice was soothing. "Shh, it's all right; it's all over now. Put your head on my shoulder."

He complied with the youth's order, trying to steady himself. Part of him knew that this was the moment at which he should be the one doing the comforting. That had always been his way when around others, but somehow he seldom managed to take this role when he was with Elsdon.

"You're shaking," Elsdon whispered as he cradled Layle. "Are you always this way afterwards? Or did something hurt you in the dreaming?"

"Yes," said Layle, his hand tightening upon Elsdon's. "Something hurt me a great deal. There was a breaking."

Elsdon's breath drew in sharply. Layle felt the blood under the young Seeker's skin pump harder. "Was there a transformation?"

Layle nodded. He was still struggling to break free of the shaking.

He told Elsdon as much as he dared of the final moments of the dreaming – not of the rape, which would never have been countenanced in any Yclau prison, but of the willingness to abuse. Even if Elsdon thought Layle had been remembering his last days at an Yclau prison, the tale made sense. Elsdon was silent a while, then said, "The youth in your dreaming . . ."

He could trust Elsdon to center in upon the greatest danger. "No," he said. "The youth in my dreaming was you. I wasn't dreaming of someone else's pain. I *was* with a prisoner at the time I made the decision to leave the prison I worked at before, but he was an older man. I arranged afterwards for him to be released. The dreaming had nothing in it of him; everything of the youth that wasn't my own imagining was you."

"How much of me?" Elsdon asked softly. His body was still languorous from the lovemaking as he held Layle in his arms.

"Very little at first. Your looks . . . your gestures . . . It was when you began to speak to me that things changed in the dreaming."

"I'm sorry," said Elsdon. "I'd forgotten your instruction to remain silent."

Layle shook his head. They were still lying together on the bed; outside the cell, the corridors were quiet in the hour before dawn. No dawn would be seen in this underground world. The only light in this room came from the lamps, which had burned low and were casting a soft light onto Elsdon's face.

"You always know what I need better than I do," Layle said. "Earlier in the dreaming, something had been struggling to break through – the part of me that felt revulsion at what I was doing. It couldn't get through; I kept pushing it back. But when you started to speak . . . It was as though this world began to break through more and more. First we talked about your beauty, and then we had that conversation when you insisted that you could relax enough for me to continue, and then you said you had done this for the sake of my enjoyment. And that was the moment at which the breaking occurred." He closed his eyes and shivered, feeling the echo of the pain touch him.

Elsdon's hands stroked him, steadying him. "It was a hard breaking?" he said quietly.

"Yes," Layle replied in a low voice. "Very hard. It had to be, to break me out of what I had made myself into. I remember that, though I'd pushed away the memory of the pain after all these years. If you'll talk to some of the older Seekers, they'll tell you how I was when I first arrived here – 'like a prisoner who was kept on the rack for too long,' one of them said. . . . Well, you know. It hasn't been so long since it happened to you."

Elsdon kissed Layle's brow lightly and shifted his position so that he was lying beside the other man. "Was there anything more of me in the dreaming?"

He nodded. "The voice. The voice of the part of me that broke free at that moment and demanded that I transform myself. It was all symbolic in the dreaming, of course. In reality, I remember making those decisions, but I

didn't put them into words. But in the dreaming, you were the one who spoke the words. You bound me at the same moment you freed me."

Elsdon trailed his hand softly over Layle's chest, his lids lowered in concentration at what Layle was saying. It was a Seeker's look. The first time Layle had seen it in a young prisoner he was searching, he had known what Elsdon could be if he was willing to break himself. Now Elsdon said, as he continued the delicate job of binding Layle's wounds, "This never happened in your dreamings before?"

"Never. Always before, the dreamings had ended with the dea— With the darkest part of my desire. And with that darkness would come intense pleasure, but when the pleasure was over I'd feel filthy, as though I had been rolling in my own waste. This time, the pleasure was taken away from me, but afterwards . . . Well, again, you know. You remember what it was like."

Elsdon nodded. "I wish you could have both," he said quietly. "The pleasure at the moment and the joy afterwards. But if you must choose, I'd rather that you have the joy."

Elsdon was silent a while, his ivory skin pale against Layle's skin, which had started dark from his Vovimian blood and had been darkened further in his youth by prolonged nearness to the branding fires. Elsdon curled one of Layle's chest hairs around his finger, then raised his head to look at the High Seeker. "Did you know this would happen?"

"I didn't know what would happen." Layle lifted Elsdon's hand and kissed it. "I was so terribly afraid when we began this, my dear. For years I've succeeded in keeping my dark desire imprisoned, using it to rouse me in my dreamings but never allowing it to touch the real world. When I connected it back to reality, through you . . . I half expected to lose everything. Myself, you, everything in this dungeon I care about—"

Elsdon put his hands lightly over Layle's lips. "It's part of the breaking," he reminded the High Seeker. "It's the most dangerous part, where you risk all for the sake of an unknown good. I thought I would be executed when my breaking occurred. I thought I would lose everything. Instead I gained everything."

"Yet most prisoners are executed," Layle murmured. "The danger of loss is so great. I was so close to it; if you hadn't transformed me in the dream . . . Elsdon, I can't tell you how that dream would have ended if you hadn't transformed me. But it went too far. If failure had come, and the darkness had been let loose on this world, it would have been too much."

Elsdon moved suddenly, leaning over to scoop something from the floor. He laid the black book into Layle's hands. "I don't need to say anything," he said. "It's all here – some of the words are your own. You know it's true. You just need to believe it."

Layle looked down at the *Code of Seeking* and gave a half-smile. "Bloody blades," he said. "Who's the Seeker-in-Training here, and who's the High Seeker? Are you going to be assigning me prisoners next? Or pointing out the errors I made in this?"

"That's next week," Elsdon said, putting aside the book with a smile.

Layle looked over at the young Seeker; then he groaned. Elsdon turned swiftly back. "What's wrong?"

"Me," Layle said, staring up at the ceiling. "This bloody fool you're lying next to. It's your first time, and here I am, droning on about myself." He turned onto his side and took Elsdon's hand. "How was it for you, my dear, while I was undergoing this wondrous rebirth? I know there was passion – was there pleasure also? And joy?"

Elsdon's gaze wandered up to the ceiling; his smile faded away. "Well," he said quietly, "I admit that I had high expectations beforehand. You know what virgins are like – they hope for the impossible." He turned his head away.

Layle felt fear cut into him. He ignored it, ruthlessly thrusting it away as he would when healing a crying prisoner. He touched Elsdon's cheek, trying to push the face gently back. "Elsdon, what is it? Did I hurt you?"

Elsdon turned his head. He was grinning. "My expectations were too low, it seems. Could we do it again?"

For a moment Layle stared at the youth; then he attacked Elsdon, with hands and teeth and torso. Too late, he remembered the dangers of doing

this, but Elsdon was already hooting with glee, laughing as Layle tickled him and nibbled him.

A pounding from the wall adjoining the cell next door finally halted their tumbling play. The neighboring Seeker – in the usual placid manner of dungeon dwellers – had endured a full shift's worth of groans, sobs, and screams, but a chorus of laughter had proved to be the breaking point. Layle and Elsdon collapsed into a pile full of chuckles and spent the next few minutes alternately shushing each other and smothering their chortles upon each other's bodies.

"You," said Layle presently, "are a most unyouthful youth in all matters except the body. You'll have to give this decrepit High Seeker a short space in which to recover himself before we begin another four-hour session."

Elsdon stared at him, his eyes widening with astonishment. "But Layle! We haven't done the best part of my dreamings yet!"

Layle sighed, looking up at the ceiling. Finding no help there, he stared back down at Elsdon. "All right," he said in a level voice. "What part of your dreamings did we miss?"

Elsdon's expression transformed into a quiet smile. "The part where we fall asleep in each other's arms."

The lamps grew dimmer, drawing to their rest. Layle leaned forward and kissed Elsdon's hair lightly as he reached up to remove his own hood. "I can do that. I can do that through a thousand breakings and a thousand rebirths."

He pulled the bedcover over them both.

o—o—o

Deep within Layle Smith, the torturer who dwelt there watched the sleeping High Seeker. He rubbed the spot on his wrists where his chains had been shattered, and he smiled.

It was always amusing to let prisoners think that they had been reprieved from the worst, so that their hopes would rise, only to be battered down at a later point. For now, Layle Smith could be allowed to think that he had

transformed his evil desire into good. But his dishonesty with his love-mate had kept the evil alive within him. By the time it occurred to the High Seeker that he must tell Elsdon Taylor who he truly was, the evil would be strong enough to begin imprisoning the man who had imprisoned the torturer all these years. And then the torturer's pleasure would return.

o—o—o
o—o—o

. . . They believe that the seeds of Layle Smith's madness were planted in the previous year, though we may never know what the cause was of that planting.

The strongest evidence for this theory lies in a letter written by Layle Smith. Because the letter exists in fragmentary form, until recently historians have been uncertain as to the letter's date or its meaning. But several scholars have recently advanced the theory that the "evil" referred to in the letter was Layle Smith's approaching madness, and that the letter therefore dates from the early weeks of his illness, before he lost all control of himself.

The letter reads as follows:

"This evil arose out of the greatest good that ever came into my life, which for the past year has brought me joy and peace I never thought to have. I was taught by my old master that good ultimately transforms itself into evil, and it is tempting to think that this is the case here – that I am being destroyed, not by the darkness that had been imprisoned within me for so long, but by the gentle hope that persuaded me to loose the darkness and set it free from its bonds.

"Yet I must hold to the belief which all of us Seekers live by, that evil ultimately transforms itself into good if one continues to battle for that transformation. I grow weaker by the day, and it is hard to hold to this belief. Yet I retain hope that, with the help of those I love, I will show that the *Code of Seeking* is right and that the torturer I once was is wrong."

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Rebirth 4
IN TRAINING

The year 356, the fourth month.

It is commonly understood by historians that facts which may seem obvious to other societies and times are often obscure to people living in a particular society and time. No doubt this is as true of our own society as it has been of others, which is why the study of history provides a powerful lesson in the danger of accepting the ethical values of one's culture without due examination.

An example of this human failure to recognize societal evils can be found in the fifth revision of the Eternal Dungeon's Code of Seeking. The revision's author, Layle Smith, was without doubt the most foresightful man to hold the title of High Seeker – a man who was able to recognize certain abusive patterns in the handling of criminals in his time, and who could suggest new methods for bringing about justice.

Yet any modern reader of the fifth revision – particularly those of us who work in psychology and owe so much to this pioneering volume on methods of character reform – will recognize that, by introducing new methods to correct past abuses, Layle Smith and his contemporaries opened the door for new abuses – abuses that, in their own way, were just as terrible as those that had taken place before.

History provides such a dark record of humans' blindness that it is refreshing to be able to report that many of the abuses which became possible following the publication of the fifth revision were accounted for and corrected in the sixth revision, which was published two decades later. Unfortunately, we no longer possess the name of the sixth revision's insightful author, nor do we know what events shaped his views. . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

"What do you want me to do?"

The two men stood in the bedroom. It was morning, but the lamps in the windowless chamber flickered low, for this was the time of rest for them both – the time when their night duties ended and their pleasure began. A signal of this fact could be found in their hoods, which lay, not upon their heads as at all other times, but together in a pile next to the bed.

Layle reached out and smoothed down Elsdon's hair before saying in a low voice, "What do you wish to do?"

Elsdon shook his head. "Love, we've been through this before. What you can enjoy is much narrower than what I can enjoy. It's for you to choose what takes place."

Layle pulled back a stray hair from his love-mate's eyes with a soft stroke of the thumb. "And if I should choose wrong?"

Elsdon laughed. "Layle, you're the High Seeker! If you can guess from the posture of a prisoner you've just met whether you should give him five lashes or ten, you can certainly tell if I dislike something you do."

The High Seeker gave a faint smile but did not respond for a moment, either in word or gesture. His only concession to the informality of the moment, thus far, had been the removal of his hood. He, like the younger man, remained fully clothed in the black uniform of a Seeker.

After a long moment, he leaned over and kissed his love-mate's lips lightly. "I'd like you to take off your clothes, Elsdon."

The hint of a dimple appeared in Elsdon's cheek. "I think I can handle that difficult task. And?"

"Lie down on the bed, on your back. Stay passive, as though you were weary with sleep. Keep your eyes closed, and don't try to respond to anything I do."

Elsdon nodded as though he had just received a new piece of training in his work, then stepped back, his hand already rising to the fastenings on his shirt. Layle watched him strip, moving nothing but his dark green eyes,

which slid over Elsdon's body like warm air. Feeling himself begin to shiver with pleasure, Elsdon quickly lay down upon the bed, placing his head on the pillow and closing his eyes.

Moments passed. Faintly through the walls came the sound of people walking through the underground corridors of the Eternal Dungeon, making their way between work and the small living quarters allotted to them. Elsdon, sharing the spacious living quarters of the High Seeker, was luckier than most – in many ways, he thought to himself. A smile crossed his lips.

A light footfall sounded beside him. Involuntarily, Elsdon opened his eyes. Layle was standing beside the bed now. His shirt and his trouser flap were unfastened, but other than that he remained fully clothed – indeed, he had placed his hood back onto his head. Elsdon's gaze began to slide away from the hood, but he remembered in time that Layle could read him too well, and he forced himself to look back. The hood fell like black water down to the shoulders. The face-cloth was raised.

Seeing that, Elsdon felt warmth go through him. It would be much easier for Layle, he knew, if the cloth were down, but the High Seeker knew that it would be correspondingly more difficult for Elsdon to see him in the full uniform of an on-duty Seeker. As always, Layle put the best interests of his prisoner first.

The High Seeker reached forward and tugged at the pillow under Elsdon's head. Forgetting for a moment the instruction to remain limp, Elsdon raised his head, but Layle simply lifted his love-mate's back slightly, pushing the pillow down so that it was under Elsdon's shoulders and neck. Elsdon lay back, his neck now arched so that his head pointed backwards, toward the bars at the head of the bed. He reached up with both hands and took hold of one of the bars, pressing his wrists together as though they were attached to one another. "Shall I position myself like this?" he asked.

"If you wish." Layle's voice had grown colorless, as it often did when he was at his work.

"You could tie me with your belt—"

"No!"

Elsdon had been staring at the bars of the bed. With effort, he lifted his head high enough to be able to see the High Seeker. Layle reached out and brushed the hair back from his eyes, saying gently, "My dear, I know you better than you know yourself. If I were to restrain you in any way – whether with bindings or with a blindfold – it would bring back the memories, and you would suffer. Please cease making that offer to me. — And please cease talking," he added as Elsdon opened his mouth. "It makes it difficult for me to concentrate."

"I'm sorry." Elsdon sank back against the pillow, his neck arching once more. He could see nothing more than the bars. He closed his eyes.

Presently he felt a weight upon him, pressing him down. A momentary spark of panic ate at him; then he forced himself to relax. If he showed the slightest sign of reluctance, Layle would withdraw, as he had done in the past. That fact in itself served to throw back Elsdon's fear, as did the knowledge that he remained free to move his limbs at any moment. Layle did indeed know him; that was what made this dangerous exercise safe.

Layle's body pressed heavier upon him as the High Seeker leaned forward to kiss him. Without preliminary, Layle thrust his tongue into Elsdon's mouth. The soft brush of the High Seeker's hood stroked Elsdon's face. He did his best to remain still, despite this and the plunging tongue.

The tongue withdrew; Layle lifted himself somewhat off Elsdon's body. Then, unexpected in its softness, his lips touched the hollow of Elsdon's neck.

Elsdon drew his breath in sharply as his back arched. Then he froze, wondering whether he had destroyed the illusion that Layle was building. He had not; he felt Layle's response immediately, in the form of hardness pressing against his loins. His own desire correspondingly grew, and he allowed himself to moan when the next kiss came, even though it was on a distinctly prosaic part of his body, his left shoulder.

The next kiss was on the right shoulder, but before Elsdon's desire could wane, Layle's lips journeyed down to the soft skin near the pit of his arm. Elsdon writhed a moment. He felt Layle's hand clasp him hard, pushing him back down onto the bed. There was a moment of uncertainty while his

mind strove to decide how to react to this; then he felt Layle's lips upon his left armpit, and the matter was settled.

He tensed slightly, guessing where the next kiss would come, but Layle made no immediate attack upon his nipples. Instead he kissed the skin above the nipples, teasing at the hair there with his teeth, and thrusting his tongue out once more to probe at the skin. His mouth began to suck, pulling the skin toward him. Then the weight lifted abruptly off Elsdon.

A moment later Elsdon felt his legs being separated. Before he had time to worry about what this signified, he felt Layle's mouth upon his thighs, kissing and licking and sucking above each knee. The mouth wandered again, this time into the hollow created by his parted legs, onto the softness of the inner thighs. The top of Layle's hood brushed him higher up. He emitted a whimper.

As though in response, Layle's head retreated. A moment later, the weight lowered down upon him again, carefully slow, and then – with a frustrating avoidance of where Elsdon wanted them most – Layle's lips touched just beneath his nipples.

Layle's mouth proceeded that way for some time, circling its way around the goal in such an agonizingly slow manner that, when the groin was finally reached, Elsdon could not contain himself for long. He cried out, lashing beneath Layle as though he were a leaf being tossed in a storm. Dimly he hoped that he was not destroying the moment for Layle.

It appeared not. When he reached out his hands to the High Seeker, he discovered there was nothing left for him to do except to take Layle into his arms. His love-mate was trembling, as he always did after these sessions. Elsdon spent several minutes soothing him with his hands, as though he were holding a frightened child.

When Layle's shaking finally ceased, Elsdon kissed the top of his head and said, "What were you thinking?"

He felt Layle stiffen, but the High Seeker did not respond. He remained where he was, his head resting upon Elsdon's shoulder, his hand clasped tight around Elsdon's hand.

Elsdon sighed and pulled back, forcing Layle to raise his head. Layle's eyes looked dazed, as though he were a prisoner who had just received a hard beating. It took a moment before his gaze focussed itself.

"Love," Elsdon said firmly, "this won't do. Whatever nightmares you have within you, they can't be as bad as the nightmares I'm beginning to imagine because you won't tell me your dreamings. Nothing you tell me could hurt me as much as you think . . . unless you have taken to dreaming you're my father."

At that, Layle's expression cleared. He leaned forward to kiss Elsdon's lips. "No," he said. "Never that, I promise you."

"Then tell me. You've shared everything else with me; why not this?"

The High Seeker was silent a moment, then pulled off his hood, tossing it onto the floor next to Elsdon's hood. "Not everything. There are aspects of me we've never discussed."

Elsdon waited, but Layle did not speak further, so Elsdon finally said, "Where was I, on the rack?"

The High Seeker's eyes closed, and he gave out a heavy sigh. He removed his hand from Elsdon's. After a moment he opened his eyes and began to speak, keeping his gaze upon the other Seeker. Elsdon recognized the look; it was the scrutiny Layle reserved for prisoners when he was having them beaten.

"You were on the rack," he said quietly. "Already stretched – you were up to level eight. You were beginning to gasp from the constriction of your chest and your consequent difficulty in breathing. You were naked; I was standing at the head of the rack, half-dressed. I leaned forward and began to lick and suck your wounds – the black marks left upon you by the hot poker I had used on you earlier. You moaned as I tortured you with my tongue, but you had reached the point of breaking, and you were too weary to respond in any other manner. I licked all of your wounds, increasing the pain throughout your body. Then I thrust myself into you – first forcing myself into your mouth, so deep that you choked and lost all ability to breathe. I held myself against you for a time that way, watching you begin to strangle from lack of air. Then, when I was satisfied, I withdrew and

went to the other end of the rack. I thrust myself into you once more, and this time the pain was so great that you began to scream. You continued screaming as I pounded you over and over, my excitement heightened by the evidence of your agony—"

He stopped abruptly. Elsdon knew why; he could feel the pressure building from Layle's groin. He pretended not to notice, though. After a while he asked, "How did you enter me?"

"In the mouth and—"

"No, I mean *how*? If I was lying on the rack, my face would have been pointed toward the ceiling – unless you took the trouble to place a pillow under my neck. I suppose you could take me if I was lying flat, but it would be awkward – racks aren't designed to hold two bodies at once. And I can't imagine how you would gain entrance to me at the other end of the rack – unless you turned me over first?"

Layle's expression, by the time he finished this speech, was such a wonder that Elsdon burst out laughing. Reaching forward with his hand, he pushed back the High Seeker's hair from his eyes. "Well, what did you expect me to say, Layle? 'By all the rules of the Code, I'm in bed with a sadist! What a terrible revelation!' You didn't tell me anything I don't already know."

"Knowing that I have these dreamings is one thing," Layle said in a tight voice. "Hearing how I'm imagining you is quite another."

Elsdon gave a half-smile. "Well, I'll confess I'm glad I didn't know at the time; I can't think of anything that would have been more effective at dampening my desire. But hearing it now . . . Would you like to know what I was thinking while you were dreaming all this?"

The hood covered Layle's face once more. Not the cloth hood lying abandoned upon the floor, though. This was a hood that Elsdon had seen many times since Layle first raised his face-cloth to him: a mask that wiped all expression from the High Seeker's eyes and mouth. Layle nodded, a slight jerk of the head.

"I dreamt I was bound to my old bed," Elsdon softly.

He kept his eyes fixed upon Layle, but no expression entered into Layle's eyes. Only the tendons in his neck grew more pronounced.

"I was bound and I was gagged; my throat was raw from screaming all night," Elsdon said, still softly, as though to an animal that might bolt unexpectedly. "I had been struggling for hours to escape, and my wrists and ankles were bleeding. Then I heard a soft step nearby, and I knew that it was my father, come to check upon me – come to receive what mind-sick pleasure he always received from seeing me in pain. He lifted my blindfold, and I saw that it was you."

Still no change came to Layle's face, though his eyes were veiled with liquid light now.

"And then," said Elsdon, taking Layle's hand, "you cut my bonds, and helped me to sit up, and washed and dressed my wounds. You fed me honey to heal the soreness in my throat, and afterwards you placed your cloak around me and held me in your warmth until I had finished crying, and felt at peace."

Layle's eyes closed, but not in time to prevent the loss of one of the tears that had been veiling his eyes. It slipped between his lashes and trailed its way around the curve of his high cheekbone. He said in a voice that was muffled, "How can you trust me so?"

"Because you've given me every reason to trust you," Elsdon replied, his thumb stroking the back of Layle's hand. "You've always been honest with me, Layle, and I know I'm safe with you. You'd never do anything that would hurt me—"

He stopped; Layle had abruptly turned and flung himself off the bed.

The bedroom shared by the High Seeker and his Seeker-in-Training was commodious by the Eternal Dungeon's standards, which meant that it was hardly larger than a water closet. The three strides Layle had taken from the bed had brought him up against the wall, undecorated but for the lamp sputtering above him. He was still for a moment; then, without looking Elsdon's way, he reached up toward the lamp.

Elsdon, whose own quickness of movement could not match Layle's, made his way out of bed and came to stand behind the High Seeker. "Layle, what is it?" he asked quietly. "You're upset about more than our conversation. You've been this way all day, since you came back from seeing the Queen. Did you receive ill news from her?"

Layle finished quenching the dying flame with his fingers. Without turning his head, he said, "Another ambassador to Vovim has been lost."

Elsdon uttered a soft oath under his breath. "He has been imprisoned by the Vovimians?"

"The Queen assumes so. As on the previous occasion, the King of Vovim expressed astonishment that our ambassador did not reach the palace, and he attributed the ambassador's loss to outlaws who roam the barren battlefield on both sides of the border. He has promised to send soldiers to search for our ambassador—"

"Who will find nothing, because the ambassador lies chained in the King's custody." Elsdon momentarily pressed his fists hard against his eyes, as though to wipe away the images in his mind. "The King begged us to send an ambassador to negotiate a peace between our two countries – he begged us twice. Is he mad?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Layle turned finally. Even in the dimness of the remaining light in the room, the tension in his muscles stood out stark. "A sane ruler we could bargain with. But Vovim's King is quite capable of begging us sincerely to send an ambassador one month, and then deciding the next month that our ambassador is a threat to his land and must be eliminated."

Elsdon shook his head slowly, like a man awakening from a nightmare. "Vovim has lost more in this war than Yclau has; east Vovim has been torn to rags by our border defenses. Why do the Vovimian people permit a madman to rule them?"

"Because it would be dangerous to oppose him. Besides" – the High Seeker's voice grew dry – "by Vovimian standards, he is one of the better rulers they have had."

"Barbarians!" Elsdon spat out the word, as though it were venom poisoning his mouth. Then, catching a slight change in Layle's expression, he added, "You called them that yourself, when I asked you about them last year."

"As I recall, we were discussing the King's Torturers." Layle stepped past Elsdon and bent to retrieve his hood from the floor. "Most of the people of Vovim are certainly ignorant in matters known by other countries of the world, but they are not uncultured. The Vovimian language, for example, is so complex that it cannot be fully mastered by anyone except a native."

"I ought to have remembered that," Elsdon said ruefully as Layle adjusted his hood upon his head, leaving his face-cloth lifted. "I had headaches enough trying to learn it."

"I've seen your school records: you received top marks in that subject, and I've no doubt you could make yourself easily understood to a Vovimian. But it would be wrong to underestimate the Vovimians. If nothing else, their Hidden Dungeon is the only dungeon in the world that comes close to rivalling the Eternal Dungeon in its success in breaking prisoners."

Elsdon was silent for a minute. He was watching Layle smooth down the cloth hiding the sides and back of his head, and he was wondering at the meaning of this gesture. Though popular rumor held it that Seekers slept in their hoods, even Layle, wedded though he was to formality, had never gone that far. Ordinarily, at this time of day, he and Elsdon would be lying bareheaded in their bed, preparing to sleep, but now the High Seeker was fastening his shirt and reaching for his belt.

To fill the silence, Elsdon said, "Do you think that's where the ambassadors have been sent? To the Hidden Dungeon?"

"That was the question our Queen asked me after the first ambassador was captured. I told her it was likely; the King wouldn't bother to hand a prisoner over to a lesser prison if he believed the man to be guilty of high crimes. Only the King's Torturers are qualified to handle prisoners in such cases. I advised the Queen to send spies to Vovim to learn what they could."

"They evidently didn't learn enough." Elsdon's voice was tinged with bitterness. "Otherwise, the Queen wouldn't have sent a second ambassador."

Layle stepped toward the bedroom door. "The Queen has a keen mind. It's often hard to say why she acts as she does."

"Well," said Elsdon, catching up with Layle, "at least she has learned her lesson now. We won't lose any more ambassadors to the barbar— To the Vovimians."

Layle glanced back at Elsdon. He said nothing.

Elsdon felt winded, as though he had been thrust to a high level on the rack. He cried, "Layle, no! You can't mean that the Queen is sending *another* ambassador to Vovim."

"The alternative is more war," Layle said quietly, "and neither of our countries can afford that. If sending a third ambassador could make it possible to save thousands of lives, the Queen considers it worth the gamble."

"Sweet blood," Elsdon swore softly, "I pity the poor man she sends next. —Unless I was wrong about the King's Torturers as well? Is the Hidden Dungeon less barbaric than I'd thought?"

Layle had paused in front of the bookshelves lining the sitting room. Elsdon saw that he was looking at the spines of the books on foreign prisons and dungeons. After a space of time, the High Seeker said in a very soft voice, "The Hidden Dungeon is without a doubt home to the most barbaric, merciless, and depraved torturers in the world."

Elsdon, standing by the door that led to the inner dungeon, was silent a moment. Then he said, "I thought that about the Eternal Dungeon too, until I came here."

"Whatever nightmares you imagined about the Seekers would pale in comparison to what the King's Torturers are like. In every other dungeon of the world, even the least civilized, restraints are placed upon the torturers – primitive rules by the standards of the *Code of Seeking*, but rules nonetheless. In Vovim's Hidden Dungeon, no such rules exist. The

torturers are simply ordered to obtain confessions. The more thorough the confession, the greater their reward. No reward is given if the torturer reports that the prisoner is innocent; on the contrary, such a torturer risks finding himself executed alongside the prisoner. Once the men of conscience have been weeded out from among the King's Torturers, you can imagine what sort of men are left to search the prisoners." Layle turned. In his hand was an open book, and upon its pages lay drawings of dozens of instruments of torture. The heading below the illustration read, "A partial collection of Vovimian instruments."

Elsdon lifted his gaze from the page and emitted a long sigh. "And our ambassadors lie in those men's hands. Can't the Queen send soldiers to rescue them? She has sent raiders over the border before."

"It would help if she knew where to send them." Layle's voice turned dry once more.

Elsdon bit his lip. "Vovim's dungeon really is hidden, then? How could it remain so, after all these centuries?"

"It has not always been hidden." Layle let the book drop from his hand onto a table nearby. It hit the table with a thud, nearly obscuring the slim black volume below it. "At one time, Vovim's dungeon was as easy to find as its many prisons. Elsdon, if you woke from your sleep and found that our dungeon was filled with dozens of Yclau folk who had fought their way past the daggers and whips of our guards to raid the dungeon and rescue their relations – even the relations who had committed crimes against them – what would you conclude?"

"That our treatment of prisoners was so terrible that even the victims of our prisoners would brave death to save the prisoners from us." Elsdon's voice was quiet.

Layle nodded without shifting his eyes from Elsdon. "Twenty years ago, Vovim's dungeon underwent such a raid; many guards and a number of torturers and their apprentices and journeymen were killed by the raiders. The King was not pleased. Afterwards, he took measures to ensure that this would not happen again. Tell me, what is the distinguishing feature of Vovim's lesser prisons?"

Elsdon suddenly became aware, as he had not been before, that he was naked. He wished desperately that he had followed Layle's lead and at least put his hood back on. It was clear from Layle's tone that, in his usual abrupt manner, he had switched from treating Elsdon as his love-mate to treating him as a Seeker-in-Training. Stiffening himself, and trying not to think what an absurd figure he must appear to be, Elsdon said, "They can't be distinguished from one another. All of the prisons have an identical layout and identical equipment."

Layle nodded, in the same manner as he always did when Elsdon correctly recited back his lessons. "That is a reflection of Vovim's culture, which values conformity over independence of mind. Can you remember any other important fact about Vovimian prisons?"

Elsdon had to think a while before he replied, "Except for the keeper of each prison, Vovimian prison workers don't receive permanent assignments. They are constantly transferred from prison to prison, lest they become too attached to any long-term prisoners."

"That provided the King with the solution he needed," said Layle. "Following the advice that one of his senior torturers gave him, he hid his dungeon where it could not be found. Every few months, during one of the periodic transfers, all of the workers of one of the lesser dungeons are replaced by new workers. These new workers are, as it happens, the King's Torturers, but neither the prison's long-term prisoners nor anyone from the surrounding town and countryside are aware of this fact. Only the keeper of the prison knows, and if he should tell anyone that his prison has become the Hidden Dungeon, he knows well that his life will be short. And so the King's Torturers are able to do their work on any prisoners the King sends them, unmolested by the prisoners' relations, who have no idea where their kinfolk have been sent. After a few months, another transfer takes place, the prison that has been the Hidden Dungeon returns to its old purpose, and the Hidden Dungeon finds a new home."

"And so the ambassadors could be anywhere in Vovim's hundreds of prisons," Elsdon concluded.

Layle's gaze remained fastened on the book of torture upon the table – or perhaps it was on the black volume that lay at the bottom of the pile. "I

told the Queen that I thought there was little hope that the first ambassador was still alive after all this time, and the second is likely to be dead before her soldiers can reach him. Even the slowest of the King's Torturers takes no more than three weeks to finish his job, and the second ambassador disappeared a fortnight ago. What I've been able to tell her of the Hidden Dungeon has concerned her, though – that, and the information she has obtained from the upcoming prison conference."

Elsdon's eyes widened at this statement. "The Queen is interested in prison reform?"

Layle lifted his gaze then and gave a faint smile. "She *is* a native of Yclau. The prison reform movement began in this country – in this very dungeon – and our Code continues to pave the path for other dungeons and lesser prisons. If, as we hope, the United Order of Prisons decides next month to adopt the *Code of Seeking* as its standard by which to reform each country's prison manuals—"

"Then Yclau will have more power over other lands. Of course." Elsdon passed his hand over his forehead. Thoughts of political manipulation always strained him, and he was only able to follow Layle this far because he had spent the past year witnessing the High Seeker's deft maneuvers to avoid being trapped in the political schemes that wound their devious way around anyone with his power. "So," said Elsdon slowly, "the Queen wants prison reform extended, not only to the member countries of the United Order of Prisons, but even to Vovim, because that will allow our queendom to have more power over the Vovimians. That may help to bring us victory in the war with Vovim."

"And will bring more humane conditions to the Vovimian prisoners," Layle said quietly. "The Queen is not unmindful of that aspect of the matter; it has been in her thoughts for many years. But this is a particularly apt time for her to pursue the subject. Vovim's King, though he will not allow his prison workers to join the United Order of Prisons, has agreed to host next month's international prison conference, in hopes of convincing the world that Vovim is a civilized country."

"So the Queen will use the two ambassadors' abductions as an excuse to have her third ambassador demand reform in the Vovimian prisons. Yes, I

see." Elsdon decided that Layle was right: the Queen was too keen-minded a woman to second-guess. He stared at the black volume under Layle's fingers for a moment. Then his head jerked up.

"But, Layle," he said breathlessly, "if the ambassador is to speak to Vovim's King about prison reform, he must know something on the subject."

Layle said nothing. His expression was so featureless that his face-cloth might as well have been in place.

Elsdon felt a shiver rustle the hairs on his skin, and he knew that it was not due to the fact that he was standing naked in a cave that kept a year-round autumn cool. He had grown used to the climate easily, having been raised in a household where he was not permitted a fire in his bedroom. The chill came from the look in Layle's eyes.

"You're the new ambassador," Elsdon said flatly.

Layle's eyes remained as cool as before. "No. You are."

Elsdon felt the air hit the back of his throat; he released it more slowly. Over the pounding of his heart, he said, in as light a manner as he could manage, "So when do I leave?"

Layle's eyes closed. His hand gripped convulsively the black cover of the *Code of Seeking*; so tight was his grip that the book threatened to bend under his grasp.

Elsdon moved forward quickly and laid his hand upon Layle's. "Love," he said softly, "there's nothing to worry about. I know that the Queen wouldn't have thought to choose me, a Seeker-in-Training. You must have recommended me to her. And I know that you wouldn't send me or any other Seeker unless it was safe. You'd go yourself."

Layle pulled himself back slowly from Elsdon's touch. For a moment more he stared down at the copy of the Code; then that too he released. His gaze rose to Elsdon's.

"I volunteered to go," he said in a rigid voice. "The Queen would not permit me."

Elsdon paused before saying, "I can see that she couldn't spare her High Seeker—"

"She would spare her own heir if need called for it. She will not send me to Vovim because, eighteen years ago, a sentence of death was placed against me there when I fled for refuge to Yclau, thus breaking my oath of loyalty as the King's Torturer."

o—o—o

His mother had been a gentle-born Yclau woman who had held the misfortune to live in west Yclau during the years when Vovimian raiders spilled over the border most frequently. She was nineteen when the spoilers took her town, killing the inhabitants and bringing back with them the riches of the town: coins and jewels and young women.

She was luckier than most. Her rapist did not share her with the other soldiers, and when a truce was called the following year, he did not abandon her in the wasteland of the battlefield but instead took her home with him, going so far as to install her in a small cottage he owned near his house. He visited her there at intervals, until he died from lingering wounds in the fourth year of the truce.

The soldier's widow promptly threw the young Yclau woman out of the cottage, leaving her with barely the clothes on her back. Many miles of foot travel lay between that town in east Vovim to the Yclau village she had come from, and the young woman had no kin left to welcome her home. Apparently, though, she gave no thought to returning to Yclau, for by that time she had given birth to a mixed-blood child.

The boy soon lost all memory of his father. Thanks to his mother, he spoke flawless Yclau, but thanks in part to his father, he spoke equally flawless Vovimian. He grew up thinking of himself as Vovimian while he played among the children of his east Vovimian town, acquiring their ways of thought.

When he was ten his mother died, worn down by the struggle of working to keep herself and her son alive. Her last words were instructions to her son on how to reach the Yclau border safely, but he paid no heed. Instead,

he took the path that many Vovimian orphans did: he joined a band of street children.

The children kept themselves alive through petty thefts. Their newest recruit impressed them early on with his daring and resolution in such raids. But the time came – perhaps inevitably – when he and the other members of the band quarrelled over how severe their measures should be in conducting the thefts. He was thrown out of the band at age twelve and forced to make his own way in the world until, three years later, one of the King's Torturers took interest in him and decided to make the boy his apprentice.

CHAPTER TWO

Sunlight poured down upon Elsdon. Standing still, he lifted his face to it, drinking in the rays filtered through the crystalline ceiling.

He wondered sometimes where the crystal rock lay in the lighted world above. In a secluded courtyard of the royal palace that sprawled over the Eternal Dungeon? In an alleyway of the surrounding city, unnoticed except by prowling cats? He had amused himself one day by lying on the floor and watching the ceiling while guards and Seekers patiently stepped over the newest and youngest Seeker imprisoned in the Eternal Dungeon.

No darkness had passed over the lighted crystal except for the broad darkness of cloud; no footsteps had marred the passage of light. All day Elsdon had lain there, napping sometimes, as this was his time of sleep. Whenever he woke, he would watch the light with a fixed gaze, seeing how its intensity changed as the hours passed and the sun shifted in the sky.

The sun itself he never saw; nor would he ever see it again. Or so he had thought.

A shadow touched him, and he turned to see Mr. Sobel leaning over the chair where the High Seeker sat, in order to hand Layle a sealed letter. Elsdon had just time enough to see that the seal upon the letter was of royal gold; then Layle slipped the letter into the inner pocket of his shirt and asked, "Are you ready for the conference?"

Mr. Sobel flicked a glance at Elsdon. "The Queen has briefed me on what will be expected of me. Though I imagine that, when I arrive in Vovim, I'll spend most of my time answering questions from other delegates on what it's like to work under the most famous torturer in the world. . . . Unless, perhaps, they have met you already?"

"I doubt it." Layle lifted his drink and slid the cup's straw under the face-cloth of his hood. He sipped from it before saying, "I've had a look at the list of delegates, and none of their names are familiar. None of those prison workers have made consultation visits to the Eternal Dungeon. For that very reason, though, you're likely to endure a great deal of scrutiny. I suggest that you keep your mouth closed and devote your time to listening. You'll learn more that way."

Mr. Sobel nodded. His hand touched lightly the coiled whip at his hip as he flicked another glance at Elsdon. Watching the guard take his leave, Elsdon thought to himself that Mr. Sobel had probably already learned a great deal during his eighteen years working with Layle. And indeed, in the next moments, Mr. Sobel began to make his way to the other guards and Seekers who were standing or relaxing in chairs near to Layle and Elsdon. The men nodded in response to whatever quiet comment Mr. Sobel made, and within a few minutes, all of the chairs near Layle and Elsdon had been emptied, permitting Layle to engage in private conversation while enjoying the rare luxury of feeling warm sunlight on his body.

Elsdon glanced about the room, at the tables and chairs and the bar stand where a guard took his turn giving out drinks. No outer dungeon workers were here today. They were rarely seen here in any case, since only guards and Seekers were normally permitted in this common room. Indeed, the room had been designed primarily for the Seekers alone, since they were the only people in the dungeon who were otherwise deprived of sunlight.

"Blackstone," said Elsdon abruptly.

Layle, sipping at his drink again, raised his eyebrows; Elsdon could barely see the movement through the eye-holes in the High Seeker's hood.

"That's where your records stated you came from," Elsdon explained. "They said you'd been transferred from duties at Blackstone Prison."

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten." Layle laid the drink down upon the wood of the common-room table, marked with the stains of dozens of Seekers' cups. "That was the name of the prison where the Hidden Dungeon was housed when I left it. As it happens, there are several prisons in Yclau named Blackstone as well. Nobody has ever bothered to ask me which one I worked at."

He kept his voice low as he spoke. Elsdon found himself twisting his neck to look at the nearest group of guards, who were taking no notice of the conversation. Turning his head took Layle out of his vision; Elsdon's own hood, he had discovered, was as effective a barrier to sight as blinders on a horse. It made it easier for him to understand why Layle had developed the habit of keeping his eyes fixed upon whomever he was speaking to.

Looking back at the High Seeker, he said quietly, "No one else knows?"

"The Queen knows," Layle replied, leaning back in his seat, "and her Secretary, and the Codifier and Mr. Bergsen. My predecessor to this title knew, before his death."

"But no one else knows the full truth about you."

"No one in Yclau." Layle made the faintest of pressures upon the final word. He spoke the words in Yclau perfectly; his accent was that of a high-born gentleman from west Yclau.

After a moment, the High Seeker leaned forward and said, "You don't appear surprised."

"I suppose I'm not," Elsdon replied slowly. "It provides the answer to a mystery that had puzzled me. You told me when we first met last year that you had worked as a torturer for twenty years. You're always exact in your statements, yet I learned later that you'd only worked in the Eternal Dungeon since you were eighteen. That left three years unaccounted for, and I found it hard to believe that any lesser prison would train a fifteen-year-old in torture."

"Vovimian apprenticeships begin much earlier," Layle replied. "Some of the boys I worked with in the Hidden Dungeon were younger than I."

"Yes, I understand."

During the silence that followed, cups clanked as the barman cleared them away from tables. The room was beginning to empty. Seekers and guards from the night shift were drifting back to their rooms for bed, while the day guards and Seekers were already at their work.

Layle said softly, "Do you?"

Elsdon nodded. "I do now. I always wondered that about you – how you'd become a sadist. I knew how it was that I became a murderer: my father molded me into that form through his abuse. Not that that was any excuse for what I did, but I could not have developed the temptation to murder if it hadn't been for my father. Now I know what it was that made you the

way you are. The King's Torturers took you when you were still young and impressionable. They corrupted you into an instrument of evil—"

He stopped; Layle had risen to his feet and was staring toward the door of the Seekers' common room. Elsdon looked over to it quickly, but no one stood there. He turned his gaze back to the High Seeker, who was staring blindly forth.

After a while Layle said, "I was not a passive instrument."

"No more than I was blameless in the murder of my sister. I know that, Layle; I understand that you believe you have wrongdoings to atone for. You told me that long ago, that you had undertaken deeds at your last workplace which you regretted. But, love, you showed me that I couldn't hold the full guilt of my sister's murder. If my father hadn't instilled violent feelings within me, I would never have been tempted into acting on those feelings. You mustn't let yourself be weighed down by needless guilt, High Seeker. That's a lesson you taught me."

Layle, standing in sunlight and staring into darkness, made no reply. Elsdon sighed and tried once more. "Love, I called you a sadist, but you're a sadist in your dreamings only. You've never allowed yourself to dwell in private pleasure on a real prisoner's pain—"

"Some of my dreamings are based on my memories of the Hidden Dungeon."

It was a shock that beat hard through Elsdon's body. A minute passed before he could catch his breath, and during all that long minute, Layle continued to stare blankly forth into space. Some of the Seekers and guards in the room were beginning to notice. Elsdon saw that a number of them were muttering to each other, with evident uneasiness in their postures.

Finally, Elsdon said, "I wish you'd told me before, Layle. I didn't know you were carrying that guilt upon you. I can see how it would have happened, though. If the Vovimian torturers are as terrible as you say, some of them must have tortured for the sake of pleasure, and you being young as you were, that must have impressed itself upon you at the time. It would be hard for you now to think back at such times without remembering the

pleasure the King's Torturers felt, and that would lead to— Well. All I'm trying to say is that this is in the past. You've been reborn since then, love; you've lived a different life since you came to the Eternal Dungeon. You've never allowed yourself to receive pleasure from a prisoner's pain since you became a Seeker, not unless your pleasure could in some way benefit the prisoner. So please, don't allow the darkness of your past to overwhelm the light of what you have become."

Still Layle did not speak. The mutterings were growing louder now. Elsdon could see that the barman was talking with one of the senior Seekers, evidently consulting him over how to quell the disruption. Elsdon wondered whether he ought to speak of this to Layle.

Then the High Seeker turned away abruptly. As the mutterings died into silence, he said quietly, "This isn't the proper place for us to talk." Without looking again at Elsdon, he strode toward the door.

A path opened for him as he walked forward. No one spoke to him.

o—o—o

They ended up in the rack room. Elsdon wasn't particularly surprised; Layle had brought him here on many occasions during his nine months of training. Elsdon suspected that was an exercise in self-control for the High Seeker, since it was in this room that the High Seeker had first let Elsdon guess Layle's love for him.

Elsdon knew why it had happened here, of course. He glanced at the High Seeker, but Layle's thoughts seemed to be focussed on his work. He had flipped up his face-cloth once the door was closed and was frowning as he tugged at the great wheel at the head of the rack.

"Bloody controls," he said. "I don't know why we bother to use precise machinery if it's going to break down half the time we're using it. We might as well revert back to using Vovimian-style racks."

Elsdon tried to remember what the difference was, but he was distracted by the sight of Layle going down on his knees before the rack, as though in obeisance to an altar of worship. After a moment, Elsdon realized that the High Seeker was examining the rack's gears.

"May the torture-god of hell rack forever the idiot who designed this—"

Layle had the most colorful collection of oaths of anyone whom Elsdon had ever met. It had never occurred to Elsdon to wonder why. The High Seeker prostrated himself in the dirt, rolled onto his back, and pulled himself into the shallow space between the floor and the rack.

"Take it up one-quarter for me." Layle's voice emerged hollow from his hiding place.

Elsdon stepped forward and spent a moment checking that the locking mechanism was off before he gently tugged the wheel over the great notch that normally held it in check. The wheel spun forward without any urging on his part, its complex system of gears and weights compelling it to spin until it was locked. The straps at the top of the rack twitched.

A moment later, Elsdon felt the soft tug at his hands that told him he had reached the first quarter of the first of ten marks. He held the wheel in place and pushed in the locking mechanism, but when he released the wheel he found that it had somehow slipped out of the lock. It drifted forward, making the straps dance on the rack until he had jerked the wheel back down to its starting place, past the notch.

More oaths emerged from under the rack; he guessed that Layle must be invoking every god in Vovim to his cause. Elsdon felt a ball grow suddenly hard in his chest. "Layle," he said, "do you believe in rebirth?"

Layle emerged from under the rack, his hood askew. He pulled himself into a sitting position, took off the hood, and spent a moment wiping the dust from it before saying, "Yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

"I wasn't sure. Vovimians don't believe in rebirth. . . ."

Layle placed the hood on his head, checked a moment that the face-cloth was still clipped out of the way, then rose and matched his gaze to Elsdon's. "I am Yclau," he said softly. "By right of the Queen's mercy to me and by my own choice, if not by birth."

"Does that mean you no longer believe in the gods of Vovim?"

A quirk of a smile appeared at the edge of Layle's mouth. "Let's just say that, when the torture-god calls me to his hell-dungeon to pay for what I have done in this life, I plan to dispute his right to my soul. . . . Will you take a look underneath this monstrosity that dares to call itself a machine, and tell me whether my eyes deceive themselves?"

Elsdon squirmed his way under the rack. Coughing against the dust in the darkness there, he said, "You couldn't have raped me, you know."

A silence followed. "What are you saying?" Layle asked.

"In your dreaming. You couldn't have raped me from the head of the rack. The wheel's in the way."

He heard what might have been a choke from Layle, and might merely have been a wry laugh. Elsdon's thoughts had wandered away to the gears he felt under his fingers. After a moment, he cried, "Bloody blades!"

"It's as bad as I thought, then?"

"Whichever blacksmith fixed this last time unhooked the gear to the locking mechanism! If you take the wheel up, it can't lock. The wheel will just keep spinning till it reaches ten."

"It will spin higher than that," Layle said grimly. "These racks are designed to go up to thirty."

"Thirty!" Startled, Elsdon pushed himself out from under the rack and peered up at the High Seeker from the floor. "But I thought the racks here only went up to the tenth level. They're dangerous enough at that level."

"We only take the racks up to ten. But the locking mechanism is produced to a uniform design, so that it can be sold to a variety of countries. The torturers in the Hidden Dungeon need a locking mechanism that will still be of use when they place the prisoner at level thirty."

Elsdon stood up, wiped his dusty hands on his trousers, and pulled his hood free of the tangle it had made in the back of his head. He said, "A prisoner would be torn asunder if he were raised to so high a level."

"Yes."

The High Seeker said nothing more. Elsdon forced a humorless smile onto his face and said, "Are you telling me this to warn me of what the King's Torturers are like? Or to try to scare me from going on this mission?"

"The former. We both know that you wouldn't need to be raised to level thirty to break in the hands of a torturer."

Elsdon looked past Layle, beyond the wheel to where the straps lay limp upon the bed of the rack. He felt a shiver go through him, and he nodded.

He raised his eyes to Layle at last and said, "If you're looking for someone to withhold secrets under torture, I'm the worst person you could have selected for this mission."

Layle shook his head. "If the Queen wanted you to keep secrets, she would never have chosen you. Your mission is a simple one: to show the Vovimians the difference between barbaric care of prisoners and humane care of prisoners."

"By introducing them to the *Code of Seeking*, you mean?" Elsdon looked over to the bench at the back of the room. It held a slim black volume, as did the benches in all of the rack rooms – a visible reminder to the Seekers and guards who worked here of who their true master was.

"Well," Elsdon said, "I have the Code memorized – more than memorized. I'm not an eloquent speaker, though."

"You won't need to be, with the King," said Layle in a dry manner. "When you enter his presence, he'll either decide that you're the savior of his people or that you're a tool of the torture-god. Either way, he won't care how well you give your speech."

"And if he should decide I'm a villain and send me to his torturers? Do I tell them about the Code?" Elsdon tried to speak lightly, but he could feel his muscles knotting.

Layle's hands slid onto Elsdon's shoulders. Elsdon's breath hissed in with surprise. The High Seeker rarely touched him outside of their living cell; most certainly he had taken care never to touch Elsdon in this place. Elsdon knew why.

"If the worst should come, and you should be placed in the unmerciful hands of the King's Torturers," Layle said softly, "I know, without any doubt at all, that your presence there will transform the Hidden Dungeon. Perhaps not as far as all of us in Yclau would like, but I believe that your suffering will make a difference to the prisoners in Vovim. Otherwise, I would not send you there."

Elsdon could not speak for a time. Then he said, in a voice that trembled too much for his liking, "If I manage to persuade the Vovimians to reform their prisons . . . will you be willing to complete my training and let me become a true Seeker?"

Layle's hands fell from Elsdon's shoulders. The High Seeker took a step backwards. "You could have finished your training by now, if you'd wished."

Elsdon forced himself to laugh. "You mean, if I'd been willing to finish my training under Mr. Chapman. Layle, you're the only person in the Eternal Dungeon who doesn't understand why I chose to wait till you were returned to your duties before undertaking the final weeks of my training. Everyone else here knows that you're giving me the best training I could receive."

Layle said nothing. Instead, he turned and began playing with the wheel control.

Elsdon said, "I thought at first that you wouldn't end my training because you didn't think I could do well on the final part . . . the torture."

Layle shook his head without looking up. "All that's asked of you for that final training is that you be willing to endure whatever pain any of your prisoners might have to endure. Whether you do so well or ill is of no matter. It is the willingness that matters."

"If that's so, then why won't you take this from me?" Elsdon's hand rose to the red strip of cloth lining the edge of his hood, marking him as a Seeker-in-Training. "What is it that makes me ill-qualified to be a true Seeker?"

Layle reached under the wheel, adjusted something, and said, "Innocence."

Elsdon gave an incredulous laugh. "You think I'm still innocent? After all I've been through?"

Layle sighed and leaned his left arm upon the wheel. The fingers of his right hand travelled down to stroke the controls. "Elsdon, in certain ways you arrived in this dungeon with less innocence than most of the men and women who walk through the gates above. Thanks to your father, you knew evil to its depths. But you are still inclined to trust too much—"

"Because I trust you, you mean." Elsdon strove to push back the impatience in his voice. "Layle, that's not going to change, no matter how long you train me."

"I'm not asking you to utterly distrust your prisoners, but simply to be aware of their limitations: to know how much evil they are capable of committing, and to take that into account in your searching. If you ask more of your prisoner than he or she can give, the results are likely to be bitter for you both. You have no idea how, in the past hour of our conversation, you have revealed yourself to be entirely unsuited to take on the full responsibilities of a Seeker."

It came like a blow across Elsdon's face. He had to close his eyes a moment before opening them and saying, with throat tight, "So teach me. That's your job."

Layle's hand slid up to cover his face. Then his hand fell, his shoulders straightened, and he turned. "I am not a god," he said. "I cannot be sure of what will happen to you in Vovim. Are you certain that you wish to undertake this mission?"

"I took an oath to help the prisoners," Elsdon said softly. "Even if they're Vovimian prisoners, I think the oath still binds me."

He could not tell, from Layle's expression, whether he had said the right thing. To break the awkward silence, he added, "Besides, what Seeker wouldn't welcome the chance to visit the lighted world for a while?"

Layle raised his eyebrows, and another thought came home to Elsdon. "My death sentence," he said. "It's still active. The magistrates won't invoke it, if you release me from here for this mission?"

Layle shook his head. "When the Magisterial Guild agreed to allow you to train to be a Seeker, they knew that your duties might require you, on a rare occasion, to re-enter the lighted world. The Queen has already suspended your sentence for the interval of this mission."

"Oh." Elsdon could guess that was Layle's doing. He felt, as he often did, that he was miles behind the High Seeker in a path that Layle had long since trail-blazed. He struggled in his mind for a more intelligent question to ask. "Is there anything you can tell me about the Hidden Dungeon that would be of help to me?"

Layle appeared to worry at the question, like a hound tearing at a bone. Then he said, "The King's Torturers are prisoners."

Elsdon waited to see whether Layle would add anything to this obvious statement. At last he said, "Yes?"

"Greater prisoners than we are. Seekers are eternally confined to the dungeon, but by our own choice; even you exercised some choice in the matter. The King's Torturers have no choice. They are simply told that they will be torturers, and they know that if they fail to satisfy the King with their work, then they will be swept away in one of the periodic 'cleansings' the King undertakes upon the Hidden Dungeon every few years. New rules – such as the Code could be – mean nothing to the torturers except that those rules provide new excuses by which the King might execute them. These are men who have no incentive to change their work conditions, and every incentive to continue in the traditions of breaking that have worked for them in the past. Don't underestimate the amount of opposition to reform that you will find amongst the Vovimian torturers."

Elsdon nodded, but he found himself saying, "I can't imagine how even the most hardened torturer could fail to be moved by what he read in the *Code of Seeking*."

"You'd be surprised," said Layle, his dry manner returning, but within his voice was a new note. He glanced, seemingly involuntarily, toward the black volume at the other end of the room.

Elsdon found himself standing by the volume before he knew he had stirred. He picked up the book, brushing his hand over the soft leather and

the worn edges of the pages. Opening the book carefully, he flipped to the page he wanted, and read aloud, "'It is necessary that a guilty prisoner should be broken and that the prisoner should be made to acknowledge his fault. But after the breaking must come the healing, so that the prisoner may be made to see how, in whatever time he has left in his life, he can transform what was evil into good. Any man who can accomplish this task may be rightly termed a true Seeker, for he has learned the path by which to seek men's souls, and to prepare them for rebirth.'" Elsdon raised his head. Smiling at Layle, he said, "That's my favorite passage. You wrote it; it only appears in the fifth revision of the Code."

Layle came forward slowly and took the book into his hands. He held it a minute, looking down at the neat green print on the page, then said in a low voice, "Ordinary men ensure their immortality by begetting and raising children. Those of us who are Seekers, and who have taken vows that bar us from marriage, must find another way to be remembered. Perhaps it is vanity on my part, but I would like to think that, when the history of the Eternal Dungeon is finally written, I will receive a sentence or two because my name appears on the title page of this book." He glanced at Elsdon and then looked quickly down at the book again, saying, "My own favorite passage is a sentence that I didn't write; it was there from the beginning. 'A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners.'"

Elsdon had not laid his hand aside when Layle took the book. He allowed his palm to move forward and cover Layle's hand. "You helped shape that sentence," he said softly. "The word used in the original version of the Code was 'torturer.'"

Layle turned his gaze slowly toward Elsdon again. At sight of his eyes, Elsdon felt his breath hitch within his throat. The High Seeker's eyes had turned glassy, like that of a horse which is sickly or blind. His pupils were wide, moving slightly at the sight of something beyond this room. His hand turned slack under Elsdon's palm.

Layle dropped the Code.

Elsdon caught the book before it reached the floor. In the same moment, the High Seeker began to blink. Elsdon turned his face away before Layle should see his expression. He had witnessed this look in Layle's eyes many

times during the twelve months he had known the High Seeker – more times, probably, than any other person in the dungeon. Apart from the dungeon healer and the Codifier, Elsdon alone knew what it was that Layle saw in those moments of unseeing which so unnerved the other inhabitants of the dungeon.

Such was Layle's dark reputation that the other inhabitants no doubt imagined that their High Seeker was relishing visions of unimaginable horrors, dwelling with delight upon thoughts of prisoners screaming hopelessly for mercy.

Elsdon only wished this weren't the case. Setting the book aside, he tried to remember all that usually accompanied that look, when Layle and he were alone together: the gentle touches, the loving caresses. It was easy enough for Elsdon to think of such things when lying upon a soft mattress and pillow.

Not when standing next to an instrument of torture. He turned back to Layle, who, in his usual manner, was pretending that the moment of dreaming had not occurred.

"If you have need of help while you're in Vovim, send word to Mr. Sobel at the prison conference," the High Seeker said. "I'll be too far away for you to reach me in an emergency, but the conference is being held near the King's palace, and Mr. Sobel may be able to offer you advice. Oh, and you'd best adjust your sleep schedule – you'll be awake during the daytime from now on. I've arranged for you to meet with the Queen this afternoon; then you'll sleep in the palace overnight. Your carriage to Vovim leaves at dawn tomorrow."

After a moment, Elsdon realized that Seekers should not gape. He said, "So soon? I thought . . . Well, I can spend the rest of this morning with you, at least."

"No. I have to see the Codifier about having this rack mended, before we should have need of it. We'll talk when you return."

Layle had turned away and was about to walk to the door when Elsdon caught hold of him. For a moment it appeared that the High Seeker would

jerk himself away from his subordinate's grasp. Then he allowed himself to be pulled forward into Elsdon's arms and into Elsdon's kiss.

When Elsdon finally drew back, he found that Layle's eyes were closed. The High Seeker's jaw muscles were tightened, as though in pain. His lips moved soundlessly.

"Layle?"

The High Seeker's eyes opened. For a moment it appeared that he would speak the words he had mouthed. Then he said, in the same formal voice as before, "We'll talk when you return."

He walked away, before Elsdon could gather his wits to remind his love-mate that his return was by no means certain.

The High Seeker had reached the door and was pulling down the face-cloth of his hood when Elsdon cried, "Layle!"

The High Seeker turned. He was too far from the single lamp in the room for Elsdon to be able to read the expression in his eyes, but his posture had returned to the formality with which he held himself through most of his waking hours. He waited in silence.

"You'll be remembered by future generations for more than your revision of the Code," Elsdon said. "You know what they say: What men are is more important than what men do."

The High Seeker stepped back. His hand found the latch to the door without seeking it. He said, in a voice so soft that it barely reached Elsdon, "Oh, I hope not. I have prayed for two decades that those words are not true."

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Three weeks later, as Elsdon Taylor stood shivering in a cell of the Hidden Dungeon, he found himself regretting that he had not seen the sun.

He had seen little at all since his final talk with Layle. His meeting with the Queen had been brief; she had done no more than to tell him to follow whatever orders the High Seeker had given him. Before the sun rose the next day, Elsdon had been placed within a carriage with drawn shades, seated between two of the Queen's finest bodyguards.

He wondered what had happened to those bodyguards, and to the carriage driver; then he decided that he did not want to know. The attack on the carriage had occurred while he was asleep, worn out by the long journey in which he had not been permitted to leave the carriage even to sleep or refresh himself. It was like living in a cramped cell, and it had taken all of Elsdon's resolve to remember that he held the high honor of being an ambassador for the Queen of Yclau. He was not a prisoner, he had told himself. He must remember that, and refrain from screaming.

He lost his resolve the night of the attack. He remembered little except his own shrieks as he was blindfolded and bound. Then his attackers dealt with his screams by knocking him on the head, and when he awoke, sick and dizzy, he was here in this cell.

The King of Vovim, it seemed, had made his judgment of the new ambassador without even seeing him.

Pressing his folded arms against his chest in an attempt to stop his shivering, Elsdon wished he had been permitted to keep his own clothes. It was not merely that the thin, sleeveless prison uniform he had been given was colder than his old Seeker's uniform. He missed his hood. He would have given anything to have worn the cloth that hid the expressions on his all-too-revealing face.

He stole another glance at the man before him, wondering whether he would respond favorably to a description of the *Code of Seeking*. Elsdon doubted it. The man was built like an ogre: broad chest, muscle-bound arms and legs, hands that looked as though they cracked prisoners' bones daily. The dagger sheathed at his hip seemed superfluous. To complete the

effect of barbarity, his face was covered with a mass of hair that trailed down to the center of his chest. Elsdon had seen beards on prisoners – depriving male prisoners of a barber was one of the ways in which Seekers made the prisoners feel vulnerable – but he had never met anyone who willingly adopted such a savage appearance.

The torturer's voice was surprisingly mild when he finally spoke. "Well," he said, "this is a pleasant change. I've never broken a Seeker before."

Elsdon felt his shivering increase. He clutched his arms harder to his chest. "I'm innocent of any crime."

At this announcement, the Vovimian smiled. He had high cheekbones, such as Elsdon was accustomed to associating with Layle, and his eyes were bright and merry. "Try reciting to me the Vovimian alphabet next," he suggested. "Or a nursery rhyme. I might find that to be more of a lesson."

Elsdon took a deep breath in an effort to steady his heartbeat. "If you know that I'm innocent, why are you searching me?"

The torturer clucked his tongue as he placed his hand lightly against the rough-hewn stone of the cell wall. "If you tell anyone here that I hold such a sentiment, I'll call you a liar and have you racked. However, if you would care for a suggestion . . . I think you should delve deeply into your soul and find a crime you have committed. It would save you a lot of pain."

There was a silence as Elsdon reviewed in his mind all that Layle had told him of this place. Then he said in a stiff voice, "May I at least know what crime I have been accused of?"

"Conspiracy to assassinate the King. The two assassins your Queen previously sent confessed their crime to me. They've been dealt with." His abrupt gesture left no doubt as to what sort of dealing they had received. "All that remains is for you to offer your confession – to this crime, or to a lesser crime. If I were you, I'd confess to a lesser crime. That would save you the humiliation of a public trial."

"Public trial?" Elsdon's heart leapt like an eager puppy.

The torturer sighed. "I forgot that you were Yclau. You can put out of your mind any thoughts of rescue, young Seeker; 'public trial' does not mean

here what it means at home. It means that a few, selectively chosen friends of the King will be permitted to hear the charges placed against you and will also be permitted to mock you at length. Then they will have the delight of laughing as you are bound to four horses of the royal stables which are commanded to charge in opposite directions, tearing your body apart. Or tear what's left of you apart, after I'm through with you. So you may prefer to confess to a lesser crime. Just be sure that it's a capital crime," he added, as if as an afterthought. "The King won't be satisfied with anything less than your death."

"You're gracious," said Elsdon.

The torturer smiled, saying nothing. Instead, he backhanded Elsdon to the floor.

The torturer's hands were covered with gloves made of finely linked chain-mail, as though he were a cavalry soldier. For a moment Elsdon lay motionless on the floor, feeling tears leak out of his eyes. He tried to move his jaw, which felt as though it had been wrenched away from the rest of his skull. Then he slowly pulled himself to his feet.

The torturer was still smiling by the time Elsdon returned to his previous position. "Sarcasm from prisoners isn't rewarded in the Hidden Dungeon," the man said, in the same mild voice as before. "Best to remember that."

"I wasn't being sarcastic," Elsdon mumbled around the burning sensation in his cheek.

The torturer raised his eyebrows, stepped forward, and grabbed Elsdon's hair, jerking his head back. Elsdon was filled suddenly with a white-hot flame he had not felt for many months. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate his mind on thoughts of his work, as Layle had taught him to do in such circumstances.

"You want to try to kill me," the torturer remarked reflectively.

"Yes," said Elsdon softly. "But I won't try."

"Wise of you. I have a full repertoire of ways to make your death unpleasant." The torturer released his hair and stepped back, saying, "So,

you were being polite to me before. I don't often get prisoners who thank me for my suggestions."

"It's part of my training." Having pushed the flame of his murderous rage back into the cool darkness where it usually lurked, Elsdon felt safe enough to open his eyes. "We're taught as Seekers to show respect for others."

"To torture with kindness?" The Vovimian's smile turned to a grin. "I ought to have expected that, given who your High Seeker is. . . . Well, my dear, have you thought of any naughty deeds that you wish to confess to me?"

"No, sir. I have committed no crime against your King or your people." Elsdon's voice was quiet.

"No need for the 'sir'; we're not in the Eternal Dungeon here. Take off your clothes. All of them."

Elsdon was still gaping at him when the mailed hand smashed into his other cheek. He could not keep himself from crying out this time as he fell to the floor. He was tempted to stay there, but a kick in his ribs a moment later convinced him otherwise. Quickly he rolled away, stumbled to his feet, and began pulling off his clothes with shaking hands.

He could not find the courage to look at the torturer as he did so. It had been difficult enough looking at his bare face until now. Somewhere, he supposed, he had read that Vovimian torturers still held to the ancient barbaric custom of appearing naked-faced to their prisoners, but since no Seeker would strip his prisoner of his dignity by such unprofessional behavior, Elsdon had forgotten to prepare himself for this. He found himself wondering with dread what new expression the torturer's face would hold when he looked up next.

To his surprise, though, the torturer's expression was bland when he finished stripping himself. "Good," the torturer said. "Now kneel."

After a moment's hesitation, Elsdon did so. The floor in this cell was covered with straw, which in turn was covered with slimy substances that Elsdon did not care to think long about. There was no privy in this place; the cell's stench had kept him awake the first night.

The stone floor under his shins sent chills biting up to his loins. He bit his lip and kept his head bowed, guessing this was the effect the torturer desired. Light and shadows criss-crossed the straw, falling from the barred window over the closed door.

"Interesting," mused the torturer, nudging Elsdon's stomach experimentally with his boot-toe. "I wouldn't have thought that a Seeker would be so easy to break."

It would be safer, Elsdon knew, to remain silent, but he heard himself ask, "If I'm not to call you 'sir,' what shall I call you?"

"'Master' will do."

His head jerked up at that. The torturer stood smiling over him, his face half-lit by the light from the corridor. "Not quite broken, are we?" the torturer said. "I thought not. . . . If it will ease your pride in any way, 'master' is my title. All torturers of the Hidden Dungeon receive that title once they have finished their journeyman years. Tell me, why are you kneeling if you don't consider me your master?"

"What is your name?"

The boot that had been nudging him moved forward so swiftly that Elsdon was bent over and retching more slime onto the floor before he knew what had happened. The torturer waited until he was through vomiting before pulling him to his feet by his hair. "My name is not one I share with the filth I search," he said, his voice finally losing its mildness. "Now, answer my question."

Elsdon had to take several gulps of air before his stomach would settle down enough to be cooperative. "We're taught to respect others in the Eternal Dungeon, master, and to follow the rules of the dungeon. If the rule here is that I must kneel to you, then I will do so."

A quirk of a smile appeared on the master torturer's face. He released Elsdon's hair and said, "The rule here is that you will do as I tell you, when I tell you – and if you obey me, I may not hurt you."

"*May* not?" Elsdon said swiftly.

"May not . . . or may, if it suits my fancy. This is the Hidden Dungeon, young Seeker."

"Yes, I see," Elsdon said, with such bemusement that the master chuckled.

"Take a minute to get your breath back," he advised. "And think again as to whether you want to give your confession. You'll give it in the end, you know. It would be wiser for you to confess now."

Elsdon – trying to decide whether to rub his hand against his burning right cheek, his bleeding left cheek, or his aching stomach – thought to himself that there was no greater test to a man's courage than to place him in a dungeon filled with ropes and chains and racks and tell him, "Lie, or suffer pain."

He knew the measure of his own courage. He knew, as well as Layle did, exactly how long it would be before he broke. And so, in the manner of a man who faces the inevitable, he wondered whether a quick death wouldn't be preferable to a lingering one.

It had taken him only one night – a night spent shuddering in the corner of his cold cell – to conclude that he had reached the time of his death. He had thought through every possible alternative: that the Queen had sent spies to track his carriage, that he would find a way to send a message of help to Mr. Sobel, that Layle had disguised himself as the carriage driver and was even now finding a way to rescue him from the Hidden Dungeon. Each contemplation had ended with grim knowledge of the most likely truth: that he was alone in a dungeon whose location was hidden from the Yclau, and that he would die here. The High Seeker, after all, had made no promise that Elsdon would be rescued if he were arrested. All that Layle had promised was that Elsdon possessed the power to bring about change in the Hidden Dungeon.

Which left Elsdon with the responsibility to stay alive until he had done all he could to accomplish his mission. Taking a deep breath, he said, "If I were to confess to a crime, I would be implicating, not only myself, but also the Queen, who sent me here. That I should die an unjust death I can accept, but I am not the sort of man who would smear the reputation of the ruler to whom I owe loyalty."

"My dear," the torturer said in the patient voice of a man struggling to instruct an obstinate child, "by the time I'm through with you, you would smear the reputation of your own love-mate. . . . Are you cold, by the way?"

Elsdon was in fact chilled to the bone, both outside and inside; he guessed that his shaking must be obvious by now. He nodded.

"We'll have to warm you up." With that, the master turned to the door, knocked on it, and spoke briefly to the guard who opened the door. When the door was closed again and the master had turned back, he held in his hand a long piece of black metal.

Elsdon, staring at it, felt his knees outdo the other parts of his body in their shaking. He took several rapid breaths in an attempt to clear the dizziness in his mind. The metal was black all through – no hint of any other color. That was important. This could not be as bad as it looked.

"No white-hot pokers today?" he said, his voice squeaking through his attempt at levity.

The master smiled. "Not today. If you'd been assigned to another torturer, matters would have proceeded more quickly; you'd likely be on the rack by now. But I'm in favor of the slower, steadier method. I find that my prisoners are less inclined to die suddenly on me, and are more likely to offer creative confessions. The King likes creative confessions." He glanced at the tip of the poker, held his hand a finger's breath from it, and then nodded, satisfied. "Well, my dear, do I need to tie you for this?"

Elsdon's knees very nearly gave way at that moment. He shook his head quickly, wishing again that he had a hood to hide his expression.

The master, though, interpreted his look as last-minute jitters. "Good," he said in a soothing voice, as though comforting a young man about to undergo a difficult task. "I prefer cooperation on the part of my prisoners. It allows me to concentrate on my work rather than worry as to whether the prisoner is about to strangle himself in his chains. Against the wall, please."

Elsdon had a moment to reflect, as he walked toward the wall, that the Vovimian torturer, for all his apparent contempt of Yclau politeness, was showing very little inclination to fulfill Elsdon's visions of Vovimian barbarism. *Not uncultured*, whispered Layle's voice in Elsdon's ear, and Elsdon grasped at the voice, trying to imagine to himself that this was nothing more than another session in bed with the High Seeker.

He placed his body flat against the wall of the cell, and regretted it immediately as the cold dragged its fangs across his back. It was too late to shift, though; the master had moved forward and was standing in front of him, the poker poised before Elsdon's chest.

"Now," said the master, all amusement emptied from his face, "what was your mission in Vovim?"

"To serve as an ambassador for the Queen of Yclau, discussing peace terms with the King of—"

His sentence ended in a gasp as the master lightly touched his shoulder with the poker, as though he were knighting him with a sword. Elsdon closed his eyes and tried to concentrate his thoughts on his ragged breath.

Breathe, he told himself. *Keep breathing. Think about your breathing. The pain will pass. The torture will end. Breathe. Think about your lessons in school tomorrow. . . .*

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" said the master, mildness returned to his voice. "No worse than burning your finger on a tea-kettle. Or a hundred tea-kettles – it all depends on when I stop. Let's just try again, shall we? What was your mission in Vovim?"

"To enquire after the fate of the previous ambassadors, and to express the Queen's displeasure—"

He ended on his knees this time, trying to retch out the bile from his empty stomach.

This wasn't going to work. His old lessons of concentration during pain weren't going to work, because his old reassurances were no longer true. His father would not tire of abusing him; he would not be let free to go to school and undertake his ordinary activities for a week or two before the

torture began again. This pain would not end. It would go on and on until he was broken.

Or until he brought transformation to the Hidden Dungeon. *I believe that your suffering will make a difference to the prisoners in Vovim*, the High Seeker had told him. *I would not send you there otherwise.* Layle had trusted him enough to recommend him for this crucial mission. He could not betray Layle's trust in him.

He clawed his way up the stones, barely noticing their icy teeth, till he had reached his feet again. The master raised his eyebrows and gave him a swift, assessing look. "You've been tortured before," he commented. "I suppose that's part of your training in the Eternal Dungeon?"

"Yes, master." He saw no reason to state who had given him his original training.

"What a waste of time. The job of a torturer is to give pain, not receive it. Are you ready?" He lifted his poker.

"No," Elsdon whispered.

The master chuckled. "They all say that. What was your mission in Vovim?"

Elsdon shut his eyes, tensed his muscles, and said, "To tell your King about the *Code of Seeking*."

He heard a step and flinched; then he heard the door creak open. He turned in time to see that the master was saying something through the crack of the door. The door closed again, and he heard the sound of voices as the guards outside moved further down in the corridor.

The master waited until their voices had disappeared before saying, "That was for your sake, my dear. The confession you just made would be likely to see you roped between those royal horses I mentioned before."

Elsdon stared at him a moment before saying, "Thank you."

The master's smile deepened. "Not at all. I have my soft moments – particularly toward polite young men. I prefer to see that their deaths aren't messy."

Elsdon felt himself begin to shake again and realized that the sweat on his body was turning to ice. "I don't suppose," he said in a quivering voice, "that I could persuade you to ensure that my death doesn't take place at all."

The master's smile gentled. "My dear," he said quietly, "if you know anything about the Hidden Dungeon, then you know the consequences for me of such an action. I trust that you don't need me to answer your question?"

Elsdon shook his head slowly. The master stepped forward, his poker raised once more, and said, "I must admit, I didn't expect you to become that creative in your confession."

"Is it a crime, then, to mention the *Code of Seeking* here?"

"Well, the King doesn't care for the Eternal Dungeon. Nor does he care for Seekers, for that matter. He particularly doesn't care for your High Seeker; the King has an old grievance with him. Why your Queen was so foolish as to send a Seeker as her ambassador is beyond my powers of reason."

Elsdon, keeping his eye on the head of the poker, said, "Because only a Seeker could explain in full about the Code. Our Code is a powerful set of rules for dungeon workers. It allows us to break more prisoners than the King's Torturers—"

He stopped, his voice swallowed up by the sound of the master laughing. Still holding the poker in his mailed hand, the torturer wiped his eyes with his elbow-length sleeve.

"My dear," he said, still gasping from the laughter, "I think that you had better go back to telling me nursery rhymes. I'm likely to learn more from them."

Elsdon said stiffly, "You may think that you know what the Seekers do. But if you could read the Code—"

"Read it?" The master reached behind his back, and Elsdon went rigid, wondering what instrument he was reaching for. But all that emerged from behind his back was a book. A slim book, bound in black leather, with gold letters stamped upon its face.

"Which parts of it do you advise I read?" the master said, his voice liquid with amusement. "The part about when to wear one's hood? Or the part about which titles you may use to address the prisoners? Or perhaps I should read the part about how true Seekers bring rebirth to their prisoners."

Elsdon stared at the Vovimian letters spelling out the title he had seen a hundred times in his sleep. "Where did you get this?" he whispered.

"From your High Seeker, of course. He sent copies to all of us here, care of our King. The King was amused enough that he gave them to us so that we could read aloud the funniest bits before burning the volumes. Your High Seeker sent me two copies of the book, though, one under my own name and one under the name of my brother. He was always clever, Layle Smith. And he knew that I liked a humorous book to fall asleep to."

Elsdon could not raise his gaze from the golden letters of the volume. The pages of the book were well-worn, evidence that the book had been in the master's possession for quite some time. Time enough for Layle to forget? How could he forget sending the *Code of Seeking* to every torturer in the Hidden Dungeon?

"Ah, I see." The master drew the volume back and placed it behind his back; this time Elsdon noticed the shift in fabric as the torturer hid the book under his shirt. "Your High Seeker didn't tell you about this, did he? He let you think that you were being sent here in order to reveal the great secret of the Code to us."

Elsdon looked up and said in a voice that tried to be steady, "What makes you think that?"

"Because I know your High Seeker, my dear. That's how he always worked. I can't tell you how many times he lured a prisoner into trusting him, into believing that his torturer was his friend . . . and then, just when the prisoner was most relaxed, your High Seeker would betray him into death." The master stared at his poker contemplatively as he said, "The odd thing is that I always suspected that his offers of friendship were as sincere as his sentences of death. He was the sort of person who was quite capable of loving that which he murdered. He was a dangerous boy; most of the masters here were convinced he'd enter into madness one day."

Raising his poker, the master said, "So, I will pretend that you did not confess to a crime that I have already permitted myself to forget. That requires a third and fourth punishment." He laid the poker onto the soft skin of Elsdon's armpits.

When Elsdon's whimpers had ended, the master said, "Try to squirm less next time, my dear – I'll be aiming toward your nipples next."

"Not on them," gasped Elsdon. "Above."

The master paused with the poker poised over Elsdon's chest. "Are you giving me orders? I wouldn't suggest you do that again." He laid the poker on his chosen targets, a finger's breadth above Elsdon's nipples.

Elsdon was sobbing when the master pulled him off the floor. "Lesson learned, I assume," the master said cheerfully. "Let's return to business."

Elsdon shook his head, struggling through the fog of pain to remember his Vovimian vocabulary. "Not . . . not ordering you. Telling you. Above the nipples . . . then above my knees . . . then between my legs . . . then below my nipples . . ."

The master raised his eyebrows, but waited until the poker had met its next two targets before saying, "You provide the most interesting commentary to torture, young Seeker. How do you know my usual procedure? Every torturer here has his own method."

Elsdon, scrabbling at the stones in his attempt to stay upright, did not reply. The master shifted his poker until it was level with Elsdon's groin and said mildly, "I've always considered it a wise policy to answer any question asked by a man holding an instrument of torture."

Elsdon tried to swallow the sobs in his throat. "I learned that from the High Seeker. I'm in training under him."

"Ah, I see." The master's poker shifted back down to Elsdon's legs. "And how *is* Layle these days? Still having wet dreams about the prisoners he racks?"

Elsdon closed his eyes, trying to cling to the darkness there. "You claim to know him?"

"Know him? Of course I know him. Who do you think trained him?" His knee nudged at Elsdon as he said, "Legs apart, my dear. And I suggest that you hold onto the chain above you. This is going to sting a bit."

o—o—o

When he was ten his mother died, and he took the path that many Vovimian orphans did: he joined a band of street children. It was there that he first showed his talent for torture.

Torture was not the usual practice of the street-toughened band; the children were accustomed to keeping themselves alive by stealing food and money at the marketplace. But the local soldiers had become more vigilant at the marketplace in recent months, sending offenders off for short spells in the local lesser prison. And so the band's leader made the daring suggestion that they should begin raiding houses at night. No one could decide, though, whether it would be possible to find the goods they needed before the householders awoke.

At this point, the band's most accomplished thief spoke up. He refused to tell his plan beforehand, saying only that this was too dangerous a mission on which to bring the band's female members. The boy was well-respected by the other children, since he had a talent for creeping through the shadows on festival nights and plucking people's purses in places where any other child would have been blinded by the darkness. And so the children agreed to follow his plan.

That night, in a house at the edge of town, a miser who lived alone was overpowered in his sleep, blindfolded, and bound. He was then tortured for information on where his treasure was kept.

The youngest boy in the band was sobbing by the time that the band's best thief took his small dagger and cut the miser's throat, having finally obtained the information he needed. The rest of the boys tried to maintain a stoic appearance, but all of them were sickened. The leader, quickly assessing that the others' sentiments matched his own, refused to allow the young torturer to plunder the miser's hiding place. Afterwards, he vetoed the idea of repeating this form of theft in the future.

What followed was a power struggle between the leader and the best thief in the band. The young torturer might have won the struggle if the other boys had not witnessed what had taken place in the miser's house. The boy was thrown out of the band at age twelve and forced to make his own way in the world.

One month later, in the same town, a merchant was overpowered in his sleep, blindfolded, and bound. This particular merchant had no desire to hold out under torture. He immediately told where his small savings lay and was left bound, gagged, and alive by his attacker. Of his attacker's appearance the merchant could say nothing except that the man had spoken in a whisper and was powerful in body.

The local soldiers made a connection between this episode and a murder that had taken place four weeks before, but did not pursue the matter far. The merchant's savings had been small, and he was not an influential enough member of the community to make a full-blown search worthwhile. As for the miser, he had been much-hated, and since none of his goods had been stolen, it was generally reckoned that an old enemy had killed him.

Four months after the merchant's mishap, the torture and murder of another man took place in a town nearby. This time the merchant's goods were stolen. The local soldiers, consulting with soldiers in the original town, made a connection with the earlier crimes, but again the merchant was not an influential enough member of the community that his murder would excite interest.

For the next three years, the thefts continued at sporadic intervals, the only noteworthy aspect of them being that, in every case where the merchant immediately told the true location of his goods or said truthfully that he had no valuables stored in the house, he was allowed to live. Somehow the thief had a talent for knowing when his victim was telling the truth. As time went on, more and more merchants opted for the policy of storing their valuables elsewhere or immediately confessing to the thief, rather than run the risk of dying slowly and painfully.

The Merchants' Guild eventually complained to the King that the local soldiers were not showing enough interest in the thefts. The King seemed

disinclined to pursue the matter until, in the third spring of the thefts, the most spectacular crime of all took place.

The nature of this was such that the authorities could no longer ignore the thefts. A massive search was set out for the criminal, coordinated by the King's soldiers, but the soldiers' quest was frustrated by the fact that no living victim had seen the thief or heard more than his whisper. All that was known was that he must have been a powerfully built man; all the victims agreed about that.

It was at this point that the boy who had cried at the thief's first torture came forward. He had kept his mouth shut for three years, as had the other children of the band, bound by the unwritten street code that forbade bands from snitching about their members, or even former members. But the latest theft had been accomplished in such a heinous manner that the band members had agreed that they could no longer remain silent. The youngest boy was picked for the mission of going to the soldiers, as he had an innocent face that would overcome doubts.

All this, the master torturer learned several days later, first from the King's soldiers, and then from the mouth of a fifteen-year-old boy screaming his confession from the rack.

The master's first acquaintance with his prisoner had come through the arrest records, and what he read there confirmed his long-held belief that the torturers of the Eternal Dungeon were fools. Their hope in prisoners' rebirth seemed to be based on the belief that prisoners' evil nature was shaped by the people around them: that if the prisoners met the right people, their natures could be shaped back to their original goodness.

The master considered this theory to be muck. In his experience, most people who did evil had been evil from the day they were born. This boy was a clear example. His early childhood had been no harder than that of many other children, and his time in the band had been, by the witness of the children and of those who had seen the boy during those years, a relatively pleasant period. There was no reason the boy should have turned to criminal torture – unless he was a boy born to do evil until someone stopped him by strangling him.

The master was thinking this on the first day, as he walked through the door to the rack room, where the King's soldiers had chained the prisoner, guessing that his time in the Vovimian dungeon would be short. There the master found a tall, scrawny boy whose eyes were wide as he stared around at the instruments of torture on the wall.

They were not wide with fear.

"What is that? How is it used?" asked the boy without preliminary, pointing as best he could with his chained hands. The master, amused, told him the answer as the boy listened, his eyes shining. Questions poured out of him: What effects did the instrument have on prisoners? How long could it be used? What was the best way of using it? What were the advantages and disadvantages of the instrument?

The master spent a few minutes answering the boy's questions and then suggested, in a mild voice, that the only proper way to understand the instrument was to see it in use.

Any theories he might have held that the boy was a masochist disappeared as the boy's olive skin paled to white. The boy hesitated barely a second, though, before nodding, and the eagerness had not left his eyes.

What followed was the strangest torture session the master had ever undertaken. Much of what occurred was familiar to him: the creaking of the instrument, the smell of burning flesh, the screams. But between screams, the boy would gasp out questions about the instrument's use, and the torturer would answer.

They proceeded this way for three days, slowly making their way through a few of the dozens of instruments in the room. By the third evening, the master's experience told him that it was time for the rack, and it was here that the boy gave his confession. His confession matched certain details of the crimes that had never been publicized – not that the master had held any doubt for three days that he was searching the right boy.

The boy knew by now, of course, what followed a confession; that had been one of his questions. As the master stood at the head of the rack and laid his hands upon the boy's throat, the boy flinched. But his eyes did not

turn from the walls where the instruments that remained unused hung shiny and bloodless. In the boy's eyes was regret.

The master then took the action that, in years after, he would identify as the most foolish moment of his life: he smuggled the boy back to his own room and filled out a form stating that the confessed criminal had been executed and his body delivered to the mortuary.

There was some fuss after that, as the mortuary had no record of such a body's delivery. The master's record was clean, though, and the High Master of the Vovimian dungeon was willing to back him.

Two months later, the master brought forward a boy with the beginnings of a beard and announced that this boy was his nephew, who had been sent by his parents to be apprenticed to the master. If the High Master noticed that the boy held a striking resemblance to a missing corpse, he was wise enough to hold his tongue. The master was one of the more accomplished torturers in the dungeon; the High Master could ill afford to lose him to the royal execution horses. And if the master preferred to put a criminal to good use rather than waste him into death, the High Master apparently had no difficulty with this course of action.

And so the boy became an apprentice torturer in what would one day be known as the Hidden Dungeon. And all who met him remarked on the fact that his most noteworthy feature was the excitement in his eyes whenever he stood in the same room as an instrument of torture.

CHAPTER FOUR

"His real name isn't Layle Smith, of course," said the master torturer. "I named him Layle after a brother of mine who had died in the wars against Yclau, and I told the boy that he could choose a new last name for himself." The master looked up from where he had been trimming his nails with his dagger and held his nails up to the light contemplatively. "I always thought that his choice showed a surprising lack of imagination."

Elsdon, shivering on the floor under the blanket that had been his only defense against the cold on the previous night – the master had taken away his clothes – made no reply.

"Other than that, he was the most imaginative apprentice I ever trained – the most skilled as well. Am I right in remembering that Seekers aren't allowed to use instruments of torture themselves? That they have to accomplish their torture by way of their guards?" He waited till Elsdon nodded, then said, "A pity. The boy was a genius with the whip; I've never seen anyone who could control a line like he could. I had one prisoner who fainted dead away just from watching Layle whip a post. . . . By the end of his first year, I was allowing the boy to work independently. He could break half the prisoners I let him try his hand at. By the end of the second year, he was breaking three-quarters of his prisoners. He was especially good with female prisoners. I hear it's boys these days?"

It took Elsdon a moment to untangle the meaning of this sentence; then he replied coldly, "He has a male love-mate, if that's what you mean."

"So that particular rumor is true. Odd. He could never manage that when he was a boy – lovemaking, I mean. It just didn't seem to be in his nature. I felt sorry for the boy, I'll admit. He tried so hard and failed every time. . . . I remember the night I spiked his dinner with silver pot-herb." He noticed Elsdon's expression and smiled. "It's part of the standard training for our apprentices. At the right dosage, silver loosens the tongue, making the person confess to his deepest desires. If the apprentice has any secret thoughts of betraying the King, such plots should reveal themselves under silver." The master tossed his dagger in the air and caught it easily as it fell. "That whole night, from dusk till dawn, Layle talked about the love-mate he planned to have one day. How he would care for her, how he

would protect her, how he would lay everything he had at her feet and give her the full depths of his heart. . . . That was when I first guessed that he was an idealist and knew that I should have strangled him on the night of his racking."

The words were spoken without passion; no strong emotion appeared in the master's face. Elsdon struggled his way up onto one elbow. Ignoring the pain stabbing his torso and legs, he asked, "Why do you hate Mr. Smith?"

"Hate him?" The master raised his eyebrows at Elsdon, his eyes widened with surprise. "My dear, my entire problem is that I loved him too much. I knew he was a peril, and I didn't act against him, as I should have."

"He was your love-mate, then?" Elsdon felt a heaviness in his chest and tried to convince himself that it came from jealousy.

The master gave a bark of laughter. "Love-mate? I'd sooner mate with a shark. Layle Smith is dangerous, my dear; if you haven't figured that out by now, trust me on this. No, if I needed a word to describe what Layle was to me, I'd have to say 'son.' He was my heir, the apprentice every master dreams of, the boy who would take all that I taught him and go on to accomplish great deeds. And one day I awoke to find that Layle had taken all that I'd taught him and had fled to the Eternal Dungeon with it."

His voice was as bitter as death. Elsdon lowered himself slowly to the floor again, saying breathlessly, "So why do you hate the Eternal Dungeon?"

The master glanced at the door, where the sound of the guards chatting could be heard faintly. Then he said carefully, "You Seekers consider the King's Torturers to be barbarians, I've heard. Tell me, under what circumstances do you torture your prisoners?"

"Only if they break the Co—" He caught himself in time, and added quickly, "The rules of the dungeon. We're not permitted to torture them otherwise."

"Under what rules can they be tortured?"

"If they fail to show respect to us – the same respect that we're required to show toward them. And if they lie to us."

"So," said the master, sliding his fingers over the flat of his blade, "if you ask them whether they committed the crime they're accused to have committed, and they say no, then you can torture them if you think they're lying."

After a small space of silence, Elsdon said, "We usually don't take so direct a route. Our job isn't merely to obtain confessions—"

"—it's to make the criminals regret having committed their crimes. Yes." The master glanced again at the door before saying, "Suppose . . . This is only a supposing, but suppose that I took it into my head to overturn the governance of a certain exalted personage, in the hopes of bringing an end to this overly lengthy war between my kingdom and your queendom. Would I be an evil man?"

Elsdon played with the straw under his fingers for a moment before saying, "I suppose in the eyes of many Vovimians—"

"But in my own eyes and the eyes of other men around the world, perhaps not? Now, suppose that the Hidden Dungeon was run under the same rules as the Eternal Dungeon. My torturer's job would be, not only to obtain a confession, but to convince me that I did wrong. After several weeks of searching he succeeded in his task; due to my 'rebirth' I received a pardon and was released into freedom. I then spent the rest of my life admonishing all the young people who came under my influence against the evils of trying to revolt against that exalted personage. Wouldn't that be a wondrous accomplishment on the part of my torturer?"

Elsdon was silent. The straw had covered his fingers with muck. He dropped it and pulled his blanket closer to his body.

"When your master was a boy," the torturer said, looking down upon Elsdon with a grave expression, "I told him what I tell all my apprentices: Never forget that what we do is evil. It is not nice, it is not pretty, and it is not at all admirable. It is necessary in order to keep the King's peace. But never see our work as anything other than the barbarism it is. Never idealize it."

The master's grip had tightened upon his dagger hilt. The muscles in his arms stood out in relief, and his eyes were dark under the lamplight from the corridor. He said, in a voice barely above a whisper, "He listened to me. He appeared to understand and agree. And then he fled to the Eternal Dungeon – to that place where torturers go beyond the necessary breaking of the body and take delight in breaking men's souls, forcing prisoners to hold beliefs that tear asunder their consciences. He went to that place, and he didn't merely follow orders there. He began to give orders, to make it even more likely that the prisoners there would have their souls bent and bloodied and reshaped out of all recognition. He taught others, like yourself, how to commit the greatest atrocities mankind has ever known, and he taught you to call what you did goodness." The master's fist upon the dagger began to shake. "And you ask me why I believe I should have strangled him when he was fifteen. I would have spared him this shamelessness – I would have spared the world from what he has become."

Elsdon said nothing; the pain in his chest had robbed him of all speech. He ducked his head and stared down at the filthy straw, its golden sheen hidden by the brown muck lying upon it. Then he felt a shadow fall over him, and he jerked his head up.

The master was on one knee beside him. In his hand was the dagger, and Elsdon felt his breath stop abruptly. But the master merely said in a soft voice, "You Seekers take what is ugly and place a varnish of beauty upon it, making it seem as though the ugly is beautiful. We who work in the Hidden Dungeon have never shown such dishonesty; we say plainly that what we do is ugly. Necessary, but ugly. Do you still believe that you are the masters, and we are nothing more than ignorant apprentices?"

Elsdon looked down at the straw, let the slime there coat his fingers for a moment, then shook his head.

He felt the master touch his shoulder softly. Then the Vovimian rose and said in a brisk voice, "Well, enough chit-chat. How was your night?"

Elsdon turned his eyes upward to the man looming over him. Swallowing through the hardness in his throat, he said, "The music was a pleasant surprise, but I found the screaming to be disharmonious with it. Though the periodic cursing had a certain primitive charm to it."

The master stared at him a moment, then gave a roar of laughter. "A prisoner who jests with his torturer. It's been a long time since I've had one of those."

Elsdon gathered himself up onto his elbow again and said, "Truly, I'm curious about the music. It seemed to be coming through the wall behind me; do you have a music hall there?"

He felt his stomach clench as he saw the master's eyes grow merrier. He could guess that the torturer knew the reason for his question. Rather than turn aside the question, though, the master said, "That music? It was the King's irony."

Elsdon stared blankly at him, and the master laughed again. "Tell me, young Seeker: Where do you think would be an appropriate place for a prison reform conference?"

Elsdon rolled onto his back, gritting his teeth against the lash of pain that accompanied any movement of his body now. He stared at the wall, saying, "In the Hidden Dungeon?"

"Well, a space aways from it. The lesser prison we're housed in at the moment is part of a complex of buildings next to the royal forests where hunting takes place. The prison conference is being held in one of the other buildings. The King thought it would be amusing to hold such a conference within a cannonball's shot of the very dungeon that the delegates would most like to reform."

Elsdon said nothing. He continued to stare at the wall, his breath rapid.

"You could try screaming," the torturer suggested. "Or shouting your name, or the name of the Yclau delegate. I'm told that these walls are so thick that the sound of a hundred delegates singing at the top of their lungs comes through the walls as nothing more than a faint bit of music – and vice versa. But you can try if you like."

After a moment, Elsdon shook his head. If the screams he had heard during the week he had been imprisoned here hadn't sent every delegate at the conference running to investigate, no sound that he could produce would accomplish any rescue. He found himself wondering whether the

master had been instructed to tell him about the conference's location, as an additional form of torture.

"Is Vovim taking part in the conference?" he asked, his gaze still on the wall.

"Oh, yes," said the master. "We don't have a formal delegation, but our King is there today, telling the conference members about the King's mercy."

"It must be a short talk."

The words were out of his mouth before he could recall them. He was not particularly surprised when his statement was followed by a kick in the side. He rolled over toward the wall, moaning, as the master said calmly, "You want to watch that your wit doesn't lead you down the wrong paths, my dear. The King's mercy is a term for one of our customs here in the dungeon. In cases where a high-ranked prisoner confesses to treason, but the King decides to show him mercy, he is spared the shame of a public trial and public execution. Instead, his torturer offers him a dagger. The prisoner accepts the dagger with the phrase, 'I regret.' Note the wording. The phrase is short for 'I regret my deed,' of course, but we don't require the prisoner to say that. If he wants to think of himself as saying, 'I regret having been caught,' or 'I regret that I can't murder the lot of you,' then he's permitted such thoughts. That's the difference between the Hidden Dungeon and the Eternal Dungeon, you see: we break prisoners, but we leave them with the dignity of keeping their consciences intact."

"And then the prisoner kills himself with the dagger." Elsdon gasped the words as he rolled round to face the master. He had only just found the strength to hold back his moans.

"A quick death, far preferable to the shame he'd undergo in public. I don't suppose your High Seeker told you about that. He's as accomplished as his predecessors at editing the truth to make the King's Torturers appear to be villains." The master glanced down at Elsdon. "Well, my dear, you have a talent for making me do the talking rather than doing the talking yourself. I suspect that you have a certain skill as a Seeker. Get up, please."

The blade in his voice left no room for argument. Elsdon pushed aside the blanket, pulled himself into a sitting position, and tried to rise. A moment later he was sitting again, trying to muffle his screams into his knees.

The master appeared unimpressed. "My dear, you were only half a day in the leg-locks, and I spent most of that time answering your questions rather than increasing the pressure. You're not crippled." He reached down, grabbed Elsdon's hand, and pulled him to his feet.

Elsdon's screams finally subsided to sobbing. He pushed his face against the wall, trying to adjust himself to the pain radiating up from his legs. He knew as well as the master did that he was not crippled. He had spent the previous morning calculating how far the master could go with his poker before the burns began to destroy his body, and then had spent the afternoon calculating how high a pressure would split the bones in his lower legs. His only comfort had been that the leg-locks came in pairs – one for each leg – rather than binding his legs together. It was a small comfort.

Now, the knowledge that the master had only given him a relatively low dosage of torture on the previous day did not seem to help. All he could think of was what a higher dosage would feel like.

When he turned his head, he saw that the master's gaze had slid down to his backside, and he felt his stomach lurch. The master moved forward and placed his hand firmly upon Elsdon's buttocks, feeling them for a moment.

"Hmm," he said. "I didn't examine these as closely as I should have yesterday. Just turn your back to the light, please."

Elsdon did so, feeling himself begin to shake again as the master's fingers traced their way across the flesh there.

"I take back what I said about your training as a Seeker being a waste of time," the master said. "This is quite impressive. Did you receive this all in one session, or over a period of time?"

"Over a period of time," Elsdon whispered, closing his eyes against the feel of the master's hands, tracing the runnels left by the striking of his father's belt.

"I should have guessed. Well, my dear, I think you're ready for the rack."

He whirled around, unable to hide the dismay that streamed out from his heart. "I thought . . . I thought you proceeded slowly."

"Normally I do. But normally I don't have prisoners who chat with me while they're being tortured. I'd begun to suspect that you were different from the others. Now I know why. You've been through prolonged torture before; none of this small fiddle-faddle I've been putting you through is likely to have any effect on you. No, my dear, I'm afraid I must skip the preliminaries and proceed to the harder part of your ordeal."

Elsdon opened his mouth, but the master cut him off by saying, "My dear, when you reach the rack room and see the instruments there, you'll realize that I'm continuing to be soft toward you; there are worse instruments I could use on you. Don't be difficult, or you may tempt me to hang you from the pulley."

Elsdon envisioned that, and felt a shudder run through him. He looked over in the direction of the outer wall of his cell. It was silent now.

The door squeaked as it opened. Looking over, he saw that the master was holding it wide open. "Come along, my dear," the torturer said. "The King is awaiting your confession. We mustn't dilly-dally."

Elsdon looked past the master to the guards, who were both watching him. One looked amused, while the other was frankly running his eyes over Elsdon's body.

Elsdon fought a sudden urge to hide his genitals with his hands. He asked, in what he hoped was a dignified manner, "May I bring my blanket?"

The master smiled. "My dear, you have just asked whether you may cover your nakedness, rather than have me parade you stripped in front of dozens of strangers. Need I tell you the answer?"

Elsdon shook his head slowly. He said in a low voice, "Your answer is that I'm in the Hidden Dungeon."

The master chuckled. "I suspected from the start that you were a quick learner." And he held out his arm until Elsdon came forward.

o—o—o

The corridor of the Hidden Dungeon was warmer. It was also decorated like a palace.

They passed rooms where guards and torturers clustered, standing by man-high fireplaces that threw out light far brighter than the oil lamps bracketed to the walls. At first Elsdon thought that the gilded carvings upon the mantelpieces were his imagination. Then he began to pass tapestries, woven bright green and red and blue, depicting long-ago battles and strange beasts. Beyond the tapestried walls were pillars marking an arch over the corridor. As Elsdon passed through the arch, he saw that the pillars were delicately carved with capitals of oak leaves and acorns. The arch itself was painted with the night sky, each star carefully picked out in gold-leaf.

Elsdon, struggling to move forward with the help of the master's strong arm around him, found himself wondering whether this was in fact the royal palace of Vovim. But the mother-of-pearl shelves under the chandelier near the arch held human skulls, and the door that they passed next – apparently a main door to the outside world – was flanked by men in the distinctive red uniform of the King's soldiers, watching with narrowed eyes all who passed down the corridor, whether they be prisoner or torturer. Their bayonets were pointed outward, and they appeared prepared to bar the door against every inhabitant of this place.

This impression was confirmed as Elsdon and the master passed under another archway and found themselves witness to a small confrontation: at a second door leading to the outside world, one of the King's soldiers had a boy pinned at bayonet-point to the opposite wall. From the satisfied look of the second soldier, Elsdon gathered that the boy had been caught trying to sneak out.

The master made a grumbling noise in his throat, then said to the soldier, in his usual mild manner, "That's my apprentice. I'll take care of this."

The soldier glared at the master for a moment – apparently he was unaccustomed to taking orders from the inhabitants of the dungeon – but the master continued to stare blandly at him, and presently the soldier gave a sharp nod and released the boy.

The master promptly reached down, grasped the boy by his hair, and pulled both him and Elsdon beyond the next arch, past the sight of the soldiers. Then he released the boy and raised his hand.

The boy cringed back against the wall, but the master's blow landed lightly on his head, producing no more than a surprised yelp from the boy. "Don't try it again," advised the torturer, "or I'll tell your master."

Relief shook across the boy's face. He grinned and raced away. The master glanced at Elsdon and shrugged. "The High Master's apprentice," he explained. "I told you I'm soft." Then he took a firmer grip on Elsdon and began to pull him stumbling forward again.

Elsdon found that he was craning his neck to see the wall-reliefs they were passing: quaint carvings of tiny mice running from cats with claws outstretched. After a while he looked over at the master, only to discover that the torturer was smiling at him. "Not quite what you're used to, is it?" he said. "I've seen etchings of the Eternal Dungeon – all those plain, featureless walls. I'd go mad if I had to work in a place like that."

"Are all the lesser prisons like this, then?" Elsdon asked breathlessly, trying to concentrate his mind on the master's words rather than on the blades of pain rising through his legs. "I thought I'd read somewhere that the lesser prisons in Vovim were dungeons."

The master snorted. "And I suppose you think we harvest our fields with scythes rather than combines. The lesser prisons stopped being housed in dungeons centuries ago. The old dungeons are all closed up; no Vovimian torturer works in such a place. Unlike the Seekers, who house themselves with the bats." He gave another grin and then, without warning, kicked open a door.

The door kicked back, slamming into the master's face. Cursing, the master propped Elsdon up against the doorpost – carved with knights doing battle with dragons for the sake of fair maidens – and pushed the door open more cautiously.

A hook, the size of a man's head, swung forward, nearly stunning the master. The master roared and pushed aside the hook, opening the door wide. "That hell-bound apprentice of mine!" he said. "When will he learn

to clean up after himself? He'll be lucky if I don't use this pulley on him when I see him next. Come inside," he added to Elsdon, returning to his mild manner.

Elsdon took a last look at the corridor, but all that he could see was another heavily guarded door, with the King's soldiers scrutinizing him carefully. Taking a deep breath, he limped inside the room.

The master closed the door with a heavy thud and waited till Elsdon was several steps inside before letting go of the great hook. It swung to and fro from the ceiling, its chains clinking. The master moved over to the side of the room, saying, "Thirteen years old, and he has the brains of a three-year-old. If the High Master walked in and smashed his face on the pulley, that boy would be on the rack before suppertime. But no, because he has me to scold him, he pays no heed. . . ."

As he spoke, the master walked over to the side of the room. Lifting a weight from the ground, he placed it on a stack holding similar weights, which were attached to the chain. The hook immediately rose into the air, pulled back by the counterweights, as the master continued to grumble.

Elsdon barely noticed. He was standing motionless, staring at the great, iron table that sparkled under lamplight in the middle of the room.

". . . should throw him back on the streets, where he belongs, and let him fight the rats for his food. I ought to know better than to choose my apprentices on the basis of their earnest expressions rather than— Ah." The master had caught sight of Elsdon finally. Coming over to stand by Elsdon, he said softly, "Well?"

"Sweet blood," whispered Elsdon. "Sweet, sweet blood."

The master smiled. "She's beautiful, isn't she? We call her the Butterfly."

Elsdon walked slowly forward, the pain in his legs forgotten. It had taken a moment for his mind to take in the fact that this was a rack, for it was shaped like no rack he had ever seen. Whereas Yclau racks were a simple rectangle, with the straps at the head and bottom of the rack bed, this rack consisted of two equal-sided triangles that overlapped at their points.

Where the points overlapped was a short, narrow rectangle – the body of the butterfly.

The rack was all of iron, but it was not smooth iron. The face of the iron had been turned into a relief of a butterfly: the triangles were delicately feathered like wings, while the narrow rectangle was molded into the shape, not of a butterfly's body, but of a woman, bare-breasted, with only a wisp of cloth to hide her genitals. Her arms were raised to form the far edge of the wings, and her legs were likewise spread wide.

Elsdon reached out and touched the iron, running his fingers over the delicate pattern of the feathers. "Are they all like this?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"Vovimian racks? Oh, each one is different. This is a land of artists, my dear. We have more of them than we know what to do with, and an artist who obtains a commission to decorate a prison considers himself a lucky man. Racks are the oldest form of Vovimian prison decoration; this one is four centuries old, though it has been re-incised every few decades and its machinery updated."

"Not uncultured," murmured Elsdon. "That's what the High Seeker said about Vovim."

"It's good of him to remember." The master's voice was dry. "As a boy, Layle had a passion for the arts: theater-goings, etchings, literature . . . I always wondered how he could bear to live in a place like Yclau. Mind you, you produce decent machinery," the master added politely. "We import our locking mechanisms from Yclau."

Elsdon moved forward to look. The wheel was the only part of the rack that resembled that which he knew. Though it was made of iron and incised with curling lines, it was much the same size and shape as the wheel of an Yclau rack. It was placed on one side of the rack rather than at the head, and Elsdon bent over it to look at the controls below. Yes, there was the same rust-red locking mechanism, though it was attached, not to one wheel control, but to four.

He looked up at the master, who was hovering nearby. "The four straps can be separately operated?"

The master nodded. "If desired. It's sometimes helpful to strap the torso down and keep one set of limbs loose, so that the prisoner can realize fully how much he has been stretched. If he— What are you doing?" The master's voice turned sharp as Elsdon ducked down.

Elsdon's voice emerged hollow from underneath the rack. "It's a maze down here! How does this all work?"

Half an hour later, Elsdon was still sitting under the rack, his legs folded within his arms, listening as the master traced aloud the gears and weights, far beyond the complexity of any Yclau rack. His bottom had grown cold. Unlike in Yclau, the racks here were not hollow at the base; rather, they rested on a solid iron foundation, and the workings were placed between the foundation and the groin-high bed. Elsdon had slid down in order to keep his head from bumping against the bed above. The master was more comfortably seated outside the rack, on the neatly-swept stone floor.

"Well, my dear," he said, as Elsdon gathered breath to ask another question, "I have no doubts now that you're Layle's journeyman."

"What do you mean?" asked Elsdon. His eye was on the head of the butterfly, which he could see from its back, and he was thinking that he should ask the master why the head was hinged.

"It's been twenty years – no, twenty-one – since I last had a conversation like this. Enjoyable as it is to relive old days, though, I think it's time that we proceeded to the next stage. I trust that you share Layle's talent for asking questions between your screams."

Elsdon's chest grew suddenly tight. He allowed the master to pull him out from under the rack and onto his feet, but when the torturer gestured toward the bed of the rack, Elsdon said, "Look, you don't— You needn't—"

The master sighed. "Do you want me to call the guards to hold you down?" he asked gently.

Elsdon bit his lip and shook his head. He took a breath, and then another breath, and then he pulled himself up onto the rack.

The iron was cold against his skin. He lay down carefully upon the naked butterfly-woman, spreading his arms in imitation of her gesture. So far

successful. He should think about the butterfly – think of it flying free in the air.

He felt the strap touch his wrist and flinched away. The master's hand grasped his wrist immediately, dragging it back into place. "Don't be difficult, my dear," the master said. "The more you struggle, the harder I'm going to have to tighten these at the start."

The chain holding the strap was still loose. He tried to remember that. He was lying in bed, wearing some rather odd shirt-cuffs – no, he was flying free in the air . . .

The master finished binding the fourth strap around his left ankle; none of the straps were cushioned, as they would have been in Yclau. Before Elsdon had time to decide whether this made matters better or worse, he heard the familiar clink of the wheel turning past the initial notch. At once, the strap-chains went taut.

He screamed.

He managed to swallow the scream into light sobs and heavy pants. Next to him the master said, "Well, that's a gratifying response. I was beginning to think that there wasn't any instrument here that could frighten you. Now, then . . . No, wait. My head is wandered off to pasture this morning; I've skipped a step." He moved back to the head of the rack, and a moment later a piece of cloth fell over Elsdon's eyes, cutting off light.

Elsdon's sobs deepened. "Sweet blood," he said in a choked voice. "Sweet, sweet blood."

The master chuckled lightly as he finished tying the blindfold. "You'd be better off praying to the torture-god; he's the one most likely to hear you in this place. Now, I think we'll start you at level eight."

"Why eight?" Elsdon asked through teeth that were beginning to chatter.

"No particular reason. It's my favorite number."

There was a whirring sound, and then Elsdon could not breathe. His chest refused to rise – something was holding it down, the same thing that was wrenching his arms and legs out of their sockets. He opened his mouth in

an attempt to scream, and then became aware that the feel of the straps had lessened. He was at so high a level now that his wrists and ankles were beginning to numb. A little bit higher, and he wouldn't be able to feel the bindings at all. Just a little bit higher . . .

"Excuse me?" The master spoke close to Elsdon's ear. The torturer had evidently leaned over the rack. "Did I hear you say that you want me to take you *higher*?"

Elsdon made no reply. He was still trying to figure out the trick to making his chest rise. "I wonder," said the master in a musing voice. Then, with terrifying suddenness, the wheel whirled again, the chains grew less taut, and Elsdon could feel the full force of the bindings.

He could not stop his screams this time. The best he could do was turn them into high-pitched moans. "Interesting," the master said above him. "Why do I have the feeling that if I took you off the rack and bound you hand-to-foot, I'd get the same effect?"

"I'll tell you anything," Elsdon sobbed. "Anything at all."

"Of course you will, my dear – just hold that thought. There's another duty left for me to do."

Elsdon heard him step to the head of the rack again. There was a click, and then Elsdon's head was yanked back, falling as the hinged head of the butterfly-woman was released backwards. He was left barely able to swallow or breathe, with his face pointed straight back.

He heard the rustle of cloth, and all his sobs were stilled momentarily by a great silence that seemed to extend through his whole body. He said, in a toneless voice, "You're going to rape me."

"How clever of you to guess, my dear; most of my prisoners aren't as quick-witted as you. . . . But I forgot. You were trained by Layle."

"Yes," said Elsdon. "He trained me for this." And then the rest of his words were swallowed by a scream that never emerged from his throat, for in the next moment his mouth was stopped up.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hidden Dungeon was still. Somewhere in a cell nearby, a prisoner sobbed – a familiar refrain that had often lulled Elsdon to sleep at bedtime in the Eternal Dungeon. Elsewhere, the voice of one of the King's soldiers sharply challenged a master who had ventured too near an exit. The chain links of the pulley grated against one another, stirred by some unseen force.

Other than that, the room was silent. Elsdon had long ago lost the power to scream.

He was still bound, and he could feel the bindings, but the bite of the straps came to him as though from a distance. Clearer to him was the ache from the wounds on his torso that had been reopened by the master's tongue and teeth, the continued ache from his legs, and the blood trickling through his throat. He swallowed, and felt again the raw flesh silently scream from the contact.

It was worse on the other end. He turned his eyes toward the master, who had lifted his blindfold before stepping away from the rack. The torturer was in the process of buttoning his shirt. He did not look like a man who had gleefully finished his much-loved playtime. Rather, his face held the weariness of an elderly laborer who has completed one more dreary duty and is looking forward to the end of his workday.

The master's work was not yet finished, Elsdon knew. He tried to remember what crime he had confessed to, but the thought slipped from his mind, like drops of water through an hour-clock. He swallowed again, tasting the bitterness of the blood.

"Layle will kill you for this."

The master glanced over at him upon his whisper. "You mean, for raping his journeyman? Well, I admit that, under ordinary circumstances, I'd be offering up thanksgivings to the gods that Layle is barred by his death sentence from entering Vovim. Given what you told me yesterday, though, I'm inclined to guess that he sent you to me as a gift. He was always a generous boy."

He did not smile as he spoke. Again Elsdon was left with the impression of a man who had undertaken disagreeable work and was glad it was over. A more striking contrast with the High Seeker could not have existed.

"You're quiet, young Seeker," the master commented, smoothing down his sleeves. "I'd have expected you to ask by now whether this is something I teach my apprentices."

"I don't need to," Elsdon whispered through the mangled flesh of his throat.

"No, I suppose you don't. You're Layle's journeyman; he'd have told you this much about himself, if he told you nothing else. Mind you, I didn't have to give the boy much training. He'd already taught himself most of what he needed to know, during that final theft of his." The master bowed his head to look at the cuffs he was fastening above his elbows. "A pity he chose the virgin daughter of the head of the Merchants' Guild for his self-training. He might have gotten away with it otherwise."

Elsdon's chest rose and lowered, struggling to make do with what little air came through the swollen throat, which was still bent in a curve. Elsdon closed his eyes, then opened them again as he heard the master step nearer. His heart began to beat hard, even though his mind reacted to the coming event with nothing but numbness.

"Now, my dear," said the master, "I may be a bit slow at times, but I'm not quite as poor at searching as you may have come to believe. I haven't failed to notice that you appear to be more interested in hearing about my old apprentice's life than about your own fate. Nor have I failed to notice that you just now referred to your master by his first name. Given the Eternal Dungeon's obsession with formality, I can't imagine that journeymen are normally permitted to address their masters in such a manner. What special link do you have with your High Seeker?"

Elsdon, his head flopped down like that of a corpse, said nothing.

The master reached over and picked up the discarded blindfold from the rack. "My dear, I could bind other parts of you if I wished."

A sob swelled within Elsdon's chest, racking his whole body. "No," he whispered. "Not him. I won't betray him. No!"

The last would have been a scream, had his throat permitted it. For a moment there was silence. Then sharp blades entered Elsdon's neck and head.

When his vision cleared, he was lying flat once more, his head held upright by the head of the butterfly-woman. The master was staring down at him with intense eyes.

"May the torture-god of hell rack me for eternity," the master said slowly. "I should have guessed. You're Layle's love-mate."

Elsdon's throat closed in on him. He waited. Then he saw the master move swiftly to the strap binding his right wrist and yank it open.

The second strap was torn open. Elsdon made an enquiring noise that resembled a whimper. The master glanced his way but did not pause as he freed Elsdon.

"My dear," he said, "I may just have proven myself the slowest-witted torturer in all of Vovim, but one thing I do know: Layle Smith wouldn't send his love-mate into danger without arranging a way for him to be rescued. And I do not wish to be in the same room as you when that rescue arrives."

The pulley-chain clanked, three razor-teethed instruments fell from the wall, and an empty bucket tipped over. Elsdon felt the vibrations of the crash outside the room, travelling faintly through the iron rack. The great blow of sound was accompanied by shouts and more crashes, fainter, far away down the corridor.

The master, who had just pulled away the fourth strap, stood motionless at the foot of the rack, his head turned toward the door. Then he said quietly, "Too late, it seems."

His gaze turned toward Elsdon, lying limp on the rack. Their eyes met.

"Kill me," Elsdon whispered. He wasn't sure whether his words were a question or a plea.

"Not here, my dear." There was a measured calmness about the master, even as his body grew frantic with action. "If you are found here in the condition you're in – whether dead or alive – then the raiders won't rest content until they find your torturer. I need to get you out of here and hidden before I make my escape."

As he spoke, he went over to the pulley and stretched its chain back to the rack. After attaching the hook to the wheel, he ran to the pulley controls and heaved three counterweights onto the controls. The pulley-chain went taut, but the rack remained motionless, weighed down by its heavy iron.

The master returned to the rack. "Do I need to gag you?" he asked Elsdon softly.

The words were too familiar; Elsdon felt his body grow cold. "No," he whispered. "I can't scream."

"A small blessing. Let's see whether the gods will give me more." With one swift movement, he raised Elsdon in his arms, which brought every wound in Elsdon's body into a shrill plea for attention. Elsdon's scream emerged as a rattling of the throat.

The master deposited him on a bench nearby, then took up a position on the side of the rack opposite the wheel. With a grunt, he pushed.

The rack moved slowly, persuaded forward by the weights on the pulley and the great bulk of the master. It screeched its way across the stone floor, but Elsdon doubted that anyone heard it; the Hidden Dungeon was now filled with shouts and screams and crashes. The sounds still came from the far end of the prison.

He turned his eyes toward where the rack had been, and then looked again. There, in the midst of the stone floor, was a hole. A rectangular hole, with steps leading down it. No light emerged from below.

"There," the master said with a sigh. "That should hold the siege for a while." He left the rack pushed up against the door, came over to Elsdon, scooped him up into his arms, and then, as though in afterthought, hooked a lamp with the fingers of his left hand. He started down the steps.

Elsdon was only faintly aware of the coldness increasing, and with it the musty smell of still air and wet rock. Every step the master took sent a jolt through his body like a hard whiplash. He was sobbing now, which caused his throat to burn. He knew vaguely that they were in a place curving with great stone arches that met each other at cross-angles. The walls held doorways, and the master hurried through one of these. This brought them into another room with massive arches and multiple doorways. Again the master made his choice. The sounds of the hunt were growing fainter.

Elsdon lost track of the number of doorways they passed through. He was aware only of the pain that weighed down his body, like stones crushing a prisoner. He could not breathe now, and dimly he wondered how long it would be before his lungs gave up the chore of trying to work.

Then came the sound of shattered glass; the muted light that had surrounded them died abruptly. The master gave a muffled curse. He knelt down and laid Elsdon on the floor.

One of the pieces of shattered lamp-glass cut into Elsdon's back. It made no impression on him. The sudden stillness of movement was like a warm blanket to his body. Air began to enter his lungs. He lay motionless.

He felt the master's hand on his throat, feeling his pulse. The master grunted, though whether with pleasure or displeasure Elsdon could not tell. It was the only sound in this place, other than the dripping water. They had long since outrun the shouts and crashes in the prison above.

The dripping water reminded Elsdon of something important, something vitally important. "Thirsty," he whispered.

He heard the master sigh, and then withdraw. Elsdon waited, not knowing whether he would return and too dull of mind to care. Then he felt a hand touch his mouth; it was covered with wetness. He licked at the water eagerly.

As though Elsdon had asked a question, the master said, "I told you that the old dungeons were closed up. The lesser prisons were built on top of their predecessors. When I was a boy, I and the other boys of our town would explore the dungeon beneath our town's lesser prison. There was always a way in that curious children could find. The soldiers didn't try to

stop us, because they knew that there was no path connecting the old dungeons with the new lesser prisons. All of us believed that."

His hand went up to touch Elsdon's hair. He had taken off his mailed glove in order to bring Elsdon the water; Elsdon felt the rough callous of his thumb stroke the place where Elsdon's hairline met the brow.

The master continued, "When Layle suggested that I send a letter to the King, advising him to hide the Hidden Dungeon within the lesser prisons, I thought Layle was doing nothing more than seeking to bring the King's favor upon me. He was that type of boy: he kept his thoughts and his schemes to himself.

"Two years later, he went into the rack room of one of the lesser prisons where we were housed. He told me that he was going to clean the equipment there, and he asked me to check on him in three hours' time. I thought nothing of it; the boy always had an obsession for seeing that his equipment was in working order. But when I arrived at the rack room, I discovered that – by means only the gods know – Layle had managed to push back the rack far enough that he could wriggle down the hole underneath it. The hole that he must have known existed in every rack room in every lesser prison of Vovim. I don't know how he determined this; perhaps an artist who was decorating a prison discovered the secret when he re-incised a rack, and told Layle. At any rate, that was the night of Layle's escape from the Hidden Dungeon.

"Well, I put the rack back in place, and when the boy was found to be missing, I denied knowing where he had been that night. Of course, all this was before I learned that he planned to take refuge in the Eternal Dungeon."

His thumb finished stroking Elsdon's temple; it journeyed down Elsdon's cheek. The other hand, still wearing its glove of mail, did the same. "Now, my dear," said the master, his voice softly echoing in the emptiness, "I'm afraid that this is where we must part."

Elsdon whispered, "You remind me of my father."

The master's fingers paused at Elsdon's jawline. After a moment, he said, "From the tone of your voice, I gather that isn't a compliment. I'm sorry,

my dear. I would like to take you with me, but once those raiders break through to the rack room, the hunt will continue down here. I need to be safely within the King's palace before they reach me, and that's too far to run with you in my arms. And if I were to leave you here alive . . . Well, I would have to answer to the King for that. I have no choice."

"You have a choice," Elsdon whispered. "Layle's choice."

The thumb stroked the underside of Elsdon's jaw. "To try to flee Vovim, you mean? To try to break over the border, to make a new life in a foreign land, to hope that I could find suitable work there? Yes, Layle advised me to do that, in our last conversation together. My dear, I think you know by now that my old apprentice is a far cleverer man than I am. I might add that he is also far braver." His thumb travelled further down, to the hollow in Elsdon's throat. "This won't take long, my dear. Don't be afraid."

Elsdon felt the thumb begin to press down, cutting off what little air remained in his throat. He could not move. He managed to choke out a single word: "Sun."

The thumb withdrew. "Sun?" The master waited, but Elsdon made no reply; he was still trying to gulp in air.

"You want me to do this in sunlight?" the master asked. Elsdon managed to nod his head slightly. The thumb ran up to his brow, pushing his hair back from his eyes.

After a moment, the master said, "I suppose I can do that much for you – a final gift to Layle Smith. Not that he's likely to appreciate this gift, any more than he appreciated the others I gave him." His hands fell away from Elsdon's face and slid under his back and knees.

Cold air, blackness, the sound of footsteps echoing against stone, curses whenever the master walked into a wall. The master's hands, groping as he tried to find his way at the same time that he held Elsdon in his arms. Dripping water. Then faint light.

He heard the master sigh as he hurried forward with swifter strides. They began to walk up steps, and Elsdon, already half-unconscious from the jolting journey, moaned into the master's chest.

Warm air. A breeze. No sound of footsteps. Whispering. After a moment, Elsdon identified the whispering as coming from rustling leaves.

He opened his eyes. Above him was the moon, piercing the purple-black sheet of the sky with its cold light. The whispers were emerging from straight ahead, but he could not see the leaves on the trees of the royal forest. The shadows were too black.

He felt another sob rack him. It had seemed such a small thing to ask, that he should see the sun again. He tried to remind himself that he was an ambassador, a Seeker, a grown man who should face his end with courage. But his body quivered with sobs, as though he were a child.

"Shh." The master, who still held him cradled in his arms, knelt down on one knee and braced Elsdon's body with that knee. His free, naked hand rose to Elsdon's cheek. "Look again," he said softly.

Elsdon looked. He was vaguely aware that behind the master, to the right of Elsdon, was the massive bulk of a hillside, under which they must have passed. Beyond it must be the lesser prison and the building where the prison conference met. To the left of him was more forest, its whispering trees easier to see than the trees ahead. And behind Elsdon . . .

He tilted his head back. Behind him was the sun, a deep red, just disappearing under the horizon.

He felt his breath emerge from him in a sigh. The land here was rolling hillsides, punctuated by roads and villages. The sun was setting in a valley created by two adjoining hills; it sent shadows the color of bruises over the Vovimian countryside. In the villages, street-lamps had already been lit for the night. They twinkled under the golden-red light of the dusk.

Elsdon felt the thumb move to his throat, but he did not turn his eyes away from the sun. It had slipped further down now; only a thin line like blood separated the day from the night. The thumb pressed down.

Darkness covered the land, striking away the light with a crack like thunder.

o—o—o

In most of the lands of the world, men and women had found the secret to immortal life. In those lands, the dead lived on forever, taken away to paradises in the sky or hell-dungeons in the earth. There they would remain as they had been in the world of the living, never changing, always the same.

It was said that one such immortal, living in paradise, could not bear this life. Seeking to escape from the tyranny of endless changelessness, he sought the secret to death. After many centuries, he found the secret and let out the blood of his immortal life. "Sweet blood," he was said to have whispered, as he watched his immortality seep onto the blade he had used. "Sweet, sweet blood."

What followed then he could not have expected; nor did he ever know what took place. But the immortals who watched him knew, and they saw how his blood gathered itself and was transformed in the world into new life. As a tree falls in the forest, and is covered in earth, and then changes its form to bring forth new vegetation, so too had this dying immortal learned the secret to rebirth.

o—o—o

Elsdon opened his eyes. He was filled with fear, because he could remember who he was. That could mean only one thing: that he had been judged unworthy of rebirth and was therefore being held in the afterdeath prison where unrepentant men and women must be made to recognize their crimes before they are released into rebirth. He wondered whether he would be given a Seeker.

Then his vision cleared, and he saw an arm raised above him. A thin line of blood was cut into it, running diagonally from the wrist to the elbow. Beyond the arm was its owner, the master. His head was turned to look behind him.

Standing behind the master, with his body moonlit against the black forest, was a man with a whip. He was clean-shaven and bareheaded, dressed in the grey uniform of a guard of the Eternal Dungeon. On his shirt, clear in the moonlight, was woven a single word: "Sobel."

The master's hand slid under Elsdon's knees, and he rose slowly to his feet, holding Elsdon tight against his chest. The man with the whip said, his voice as cold as the dungeon air, "Let Mr. Taylor go, Master Aeden. You can't use him as a shield."

"My dear," the master said in a mild voice, "if you're as skilled with that whip as you used to be – and you have just proven that you are – then I well know that I can't use him as a hostage. But I assume that you don't wish for me to drop your love-mate on his head."

After a moment, Layle made a sharp gesture with his whip handle, and the master torturer knelt and carefully laid Elsdon down upon the wet grass. He spent a moment stripping himself of his shirt and laying it over Elsdon; then he rose slowly to his feet.

Layle gestured again. The master cautiously unsheathed his dagger and dropped it to the ground. At a third gesture, he moved slowly away from Elsdon and the dagger, toward the side. He kept his gaze fixed upon Layle, and Elsdon realized why in the next moment as Layle's whip, with the same crack as before, blurred forward and lashed the air immediately next to Master Aeden's face, stopping him from moving any further.

Master Aeden's chest heaved, and he took a deep breath. Otherwise, he stood motionless. He and Layle were facing each other now, not looking toward Elsdon, who could not move from where he lay, near the hole leading into the hill.

Through that hole, of a sudden, came sounds: faint shouts that began to grow louder. Master Aeden turned his head toward the old dungeon, and as he did so, Elsdon saw the line of blood upon his cheek, where the lash had landed.

"You seem to have been accompanied by friends," the master torturer commented to Layle calmly as he looked back. "Moreover, you found the Hidden Dungeon quickly. May I assume that you had assistance?"

In as cool and formal a voice as he used when searching prisoners, the High Seeker said, "The King was distressed to learn from the United Order of Prisons that, unbeknownst to him, someone in his kingdom had been kidnapping the Yclau ambassadors and delivering them to the Hidden

Dungeon. He gave the delegates of the United Order of Prisons permission to visit the Hidden Dungeon and discover for themselves what the fate of the ambassadors had been, and to arrest all those responsible for the imprisonment of the ambassadors."

Master Aeden gave a humorless chuckle. "And my old friends wonder how I've become so cynical over the years. So it's to be another cleansing – but this one coordinated by the Yclau. It's a shame that the King doesn't realize how much power he's giving up in his attempt to impress the world by his cooperation with the United Order."

Layle said nothing. His gaze had not moved from the master torturer, even to look at Elsdon. To Elsdon, Layle seemed naked and vulnerable without his hood, but the High Seeker's hand continued to grip lightly the whip handle, while hanging from his belt was a guard's dagger.

"And the fate of those judged responsible for the imprisonment of the ambassadors?" Master Aeden asked, his voice filled with nothing other than politeness.

"They will be questioned, under the rules of the *Code of Seeking*, and will receive a fair trial." Layle's Vovimian held the thick accent of east Vovim. There was no trace of an Yclau accent in his speech, even when he spoke the Yclau word "seeking."

Master Aeden snorted. "I see. Another clever way for Yclau to demonstrate her power. And you, I take it, are to be her instrument of warfare. You will try to force your prisoners to state their regret for what they did – their regret for having followed the orders of their King – and if they refuse to do so, you will give them the humiliation of a public trial and public execution." The master torturer's voice growled low, like a threatened dog. "I thought I taught you better."

Again Layle was silent, but he took a step forward. His hand moved to his hip, and he slipped the dagger from its sheath before holding it forth, hilt first.

"Ah." Master Aeden's voice emerged as a sigh. "Perhaps my lessons weren't wasted after all. Thank you." He reached forth his hand.

Layle pulled the dagger back, out of Master Aeden's reach, but he did not sheathe it. He waited.

A smile played at the master torturer's lips. He bowed his head briefly and said, with mock formality, "I regret." Then he reached forward and took the dagger offered to him again.

"Why do I have the feeling," Master Aeden said, "that you arranged this whole exercise simply in order to hear me say those words?"

There was silence again, but for the shouts, which were closer now. Elsdon, who had tossed off the shirt in his struggle to rise, was trying to speak over the shouts. All he could manage was to whisper Layle's name. He knew that the High Seeker must be able to hear him, but Layle did not look his way.

Master Aeden flicked a glance at Elsdon, then held the dagger up in the moonlight, running his naked hand over the blade in apparent appreciation. Elsdon saw again the whip-mark along the underside of his arm, and into Elsdon's mind came images of what had brought the three of them together in this moment.

Layle discovering that the entrance to the rack room was barred and guessing what that meant. Layle rushing from the prison and racing his way round the hill, through the shadowed royal forest. Layle aiming his whip in the bleak dusk toward the target of Master Aeden's arm, in order to force him to jerk back his killing hand from Elsdon's throat. To accomplish this, Layle had to bring the whip under the arm without marking Elsdon's nearby chest. He had been aiming for a target only a finger's breadth in width. He had done this in the dim light of dusk.

Master Aeden lowered the blade and smiled at Layle. "May I have a final embrace?"

"No." Layle's voice remained cold. "I don't trust you."

Master Aeden's smile deepened. "My lessons definitely weren't wasted. Well, my dear, you have a clever journeyman; I don't suppose you'll be wise enough to pay attention to his advice. You're too much like me." He turned the dagger in his hand.

Layle waited until the body had stopped twitching before he let his whip fall to the ground. He turned his eyes slowly toward Elsdon, and for a moment he did nothing except look at his love-mate, his green eyes running over Elsdon's battered body like the warm breeze. Elsdon did not need to lower his gaze to Layle's groin to know what he would see there.

Layle walked slowly forward. He knelt on the grass next to Elsdon and the dagger and waited, saying nothing. His eyes were fixed upon Elsdon's face.

"You knew this would happen to me," Elsdon whispered.

"Yes."

With his last remaining strength, Elsdon stretched out his hand and took hold of the dagger.

Layle did not move as Elsdon grasped the blade that the High Seeker had so carefully arranged to be within his love-mate's reach. Elsdon gazed a moment at the honed dagger. It was still warm from Master Aeden's hand. Then he slid the blade over to Layle and offered his hand to the Seeker. "Thank you for completing my training," he whispered.

Layle did not take Elsdon's hand. He bowed his head and remained in that position, motionless, until the hunting party broke out from the dungeon and rushed over to help the Yclau delegate carry his Seeker to safety.

CHAPTER SIX

"It had to be a Seeker," Elsdon said. "I can see that."

They were in the High Seeker's sitting room, in the late afternoon hours preceding the start of Layle's shift. Elsdon, patched up and clucked over by the Eternal Dungeon's healer, was still on healing leave. He sat curled up within an armchair, watching Layle as the High Seeker drizzled honey onto fruit, the only nourishment that Elsdon's stomach was yet able to tolerate.

"Seekers are the only men in the queendom who are oath-bound to suffer for the sake of prisoners," Elsdon continued, his hand reaching up to touch the red-bordered cloth of his hood. "All of this was done for the sake of Vovim's prisoners, present and future. The Queen couldn't have asked anyone but a Seeker to undergo torture for the sake of the prisoners."

"It had to be a Seeker," Layle agreed. "But it didn't have to be you." He cursed softly as the fruit knife slipped, biting into his thumb.

Elsdon took the fruit Layle offered to him on a plate, but did not eat it. "Of course it had to be me," he said. "I'm a Seeker-in-Training; I would have had to undergo torture in any case. And I needed an experience like this to strip away my innocence. I needed to see how evil can disguise itself as good." He stopped then, but Layle said nothing, so Elsdon added, "If you'd asked any of the true Seekers to do this, it would have been unnecessary suffering for them. And I'd been your prisoner, and before that I'd been in the hands of my father. You knew that I was capable of surviving prolonged torture."

"In many ways that made you the least qualified man to go." Layle had retreated to the food-serving area. He had remained seated beside the carriage driver during Elsdon's slow journey back from Vovim, and since their arrival home to the Eternal Dungeon he had kept at a distance from Elsdon, as a Seeker keeps his distance from his prisoner. "An inexperienced Seeker . . . A former prisoner who had only recently undergone searching . . . A young man who had been abused for many years, and who is still not fully healed from that abuse . . ."

Elsdon sighed, putting the fruit onto the table nearby. "Layle, you act as though what mattered most was my own welfare. We know that's not the case. What mattered most was whether I was the Seeker who could help the prisoners. The prisoners' best interests come first."

"I wasn't honest with you about what you would be facing." Layle's voice was stiff.

Elsdon gave a sharp laugh. "No, thank every rule in the Code that you weren't! I would have told Master Aeden everything to keep him from binding me."

Layle stared down at the knife in his hand. After a moment he said, "I thought it unlikely that it would go that far. The spies that the Queen sent to keep track of the second ambassador lost him shortly before he reached the Hidden Dungeon, but they were able to learn that both ambassadors had been placed in my old master's hands. Master Aeden proceeds slowly with prisoners; that's his normal style. I didn't think it likely that he'd place you on the rack or bind you in any other way before we rescued you."

"Did you hope it wasn't likely," Elsdon asked quietly, "or did you hope that it would happen?"

Layle's hand closed convulsively on the knife. Once again blood began to trickle, but the High Seeker appeared not to notice. For a moment he stared down at the knife blankly; then he carefully laid the knife aside and walked past Elsdon into the bedroom. He shut the door behind him.

It took a moment for Elsdon to shrug off the blanket Layle had placed over his shoulders and wrench himself out of the chair. Every small movement he made still hurt. Wincing, he walked to the bedroom door and opened it. Layle was standing in the corner of the bedroom, in the tiny space between the wall and the table next to the bed. He had been staring down at the black-bound book on the table, but as Elsdon entered, he turned his head toward the wall, as though in response to an anticipated blow.

"Layle," Elsdon said, his voice breathless from the pain of walking, "this isn't about me, is it? This is about you. About what I learned of you in Vovim. About what you wouldn't tell me."

Layle looked back at Elsdon. The High Seeker's face was half-hidden by his hood. He said nothing.

Elsdon walked forward until he was within arm's reach of Layle. "You wouldn't tell me the truth before," he said. "Answer me honestly now."

"I will." Layle's voice was low. He had turned his gaze away from Elsdon and was staring again at the black book.

"The day before I left, when we were in bed together here . . . You wore your face-cloth up then. That was because you were imagining you were in Vovim, wasn't it?"

Layle's throat moved as he swallowed. "Yes."

"You were dreaming of what you thought would happen to me in Vovim, and you were imagining yourself being the one doing it."

A second swallow; this time the reply was lower. "Yes."

"And while we were separated – did you pleasure yourself?"

"Yes."

"And when you did, you thought about what was happening to me in Vovim."

"Yes." Layle's voice could barely be heard now.

Elsdon took a step forward, so that he was nearly abreast Layle, but he did not touch the High Seeker. He said, in a voice as low as Layle's had been, "You miss Vovim, don't you? You miss being able to rape prisoners."

A pause, then a whisper: "Yes."

"And the next time we go to bed—"

"No!"

Elsdon stepped back as Layle whirled to face him. The High Seeker's face was incised with deep lines of emotion. "No," he said in a hoarse voice. "I'll never do that to you again, Elsdon. Mr. Taylor. I'd already made that decision before you left. I knew that you'd learn what I am from my

master; I knew— If ever the day comes, many years from now, when you have healed enough from this that you can forgive me, and are willing to honor me again with your friendship— But not more than that. I swear, I don't hope for more than that from you."

Elsdon sighed. "Layle, what are you going to do, stop thinking about sex for the rest of your life? Whether you're with me the next time you think of sex or whether you're alone by yourself, I know what image is going to come into your mind. I know that what I suffered under Master Aeden will give you pleasure."

Layle was still a moment. Then he turned slowly and pressed his body against the corner of the room, as though seeking to escape. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I should never have taken you as my love-mate. I don't know what I can do to—" His voice broke off.

Elsdon looked at the huddled figure, his own dull pain forgotten as he put his effort into reading the signals that Layle's body sent him. After a while he said, "Master Aeden was a wise man."

Layle made no reply.

"He showed me important things about the Eternal Dungeon," Elsdon added. "Things I hadn't known before."

"I'm sure the Codifier will welcome hearing what you learned." Layle's voice was low.

"Yes, I plan to speak to him about what I learned. Among other things, Master Aeden made me realize that the *Code of Seeking* contains a number of flaws that could increase the suffering of the prisoners. That's more true of the fifth revision than of previous revisions."

Layle looked down at the black book on the table; his hand went out to touch it. "So," he said hollowly, "even this I have tainted. I might have guessed." With one swift movement he shoved the book from the table; then he collapsed to his knees in the corner, his face buried within his hands.

Elsdon looked at the book, which lay face-down upon the floor. He walked over, picked it up, carefully dusted off the cover, and returned to where he

had stood before. Groaning with the effort, he went down upon one knee so that his head was level with Layle's.

The High Seeker did not look up; he was collapsed into himself, blind of all sight. Elsdon said quietly, "You were wrong not to tell me everything about yourself. You should have been honest with me and offered me the choice of whether to remain with you."

"Yes." Layle's voice came choked.

Elsdon paused a moment, looking at the crumpled figure before him. Then he said, "Master Aeden talked about the dishonesty of Seekers. He said that we take what is ugly and place a varnish of beauty upon it, making it seem as though the ugly is beautiful."

"Yes." Layle's voice, still muffled by his hands, sounded now as though he were being strangled. "I know that's what I've done. I'm evil all through, and I've tried to pretend there is beauty within me. What I've done to you — And the prisoners here; I must have made them suffer too—"

He raised his face. It was shining from the tears. "What shall I do?" he whispered. "I don't trust myself even in this, to decide how to save the world from my vile destruction. . . ."

Elsdon fingered the gold lettering upon the black book before he said, in a level voice, "I guessed what you were while your master was raping me. Would you like to know what I was thinking then?"

Layle's hands clutched at his trousers, but he gave a slight nod, and this time he did not turn away. He kept his gaze fixed upon Elsdon, as the prisoners of the Eternal Dungeon are instructed to look upon their Seeker when they are tortured.

"I thought to myself, 'If I survive this, then I will go back to the Eternal Dungeon and tell Layle what has happened, and he will receive pleasure from hearing how I suffered. And then he will take that pleasure and turn it into an act of love between us, and my healing will begin.'"

Layle was motionless. Even his chest had ceased to rise and fall. Elsdon reached out and placed the *Code of Seeking* in his hands.

"Master Aeden was a wise man," he told Layle, "but he was wrong about this. He was a good man who chose to work within an evil system. He sullied his golden soul. But you . . . When you transformed me from a murderer into a man whose life is dedicated to using his violent impulses to help others, that wasn't a varnish. That was true ugliness turning to true beauty. You did the same to yourself when you made the decision to leave Vovim, though the deepest parts of you continue to ache from that decision. Your dreamings call you to a life of rape and senseless pain – yet every day you walk into the cells here and devote your life to helping prisoners transform themselves away from evil. That is true beauty. You are true beauty."

Layle continued to stare for a moment before his eyes dropped to the book. His thumb, crusted with black blood from the cutting, traced its way over the golden words upon the cover. Elsdon, watching him, stood up; then he gasped, and for a moment his world spun. He began to fall – and then he felt Layle's hand at his elbow, steadying him.

The tears had dried upon Layle's face. He placed the book back on the table. For a moment more the High Seeker's gaze travelled over Elsdon's face. Then Layle reached forward and took the hood from Elsdon's head.

"It is necessary that a guilty prisoner should be broken," he said in a colorless voice, "and that the prisoner should be made to acknowledge his fault. But after the breaking must come the healing, so that the prisoner may be made to see how, in whatever time he has left in his life, he can transform what was evil into good."

As he spoke, the High Seeker ripped from the bottom of Elsdon's hood the red stripe that marked Elsdon as a Seeker-in-Training. Tossing the red cloth aside, Layle placed the hood upon Elsdon's head once more: a black hood, the hood of a true Seeker.

Elsdon let out his breath slowly. "Thank you, High Seeker," he said quietly.

Layle took Elsdon's hand in his and brought the back of it up to his lips. His head remained bowed over the hand as he said, his voice tight once more, "When the history of the Eternal Dungeon is written, I will have been forgotten. It is you they will remember."

Elsdon smiled as he freed his hand and raised it to Layle's face. His fingers pushed back Layle's hair from his eyes as he said, "We can't be separated."

Then he drew Layle forward to his kiss.

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o—o—o

. . . Unfortunately, we no longer possess the name of the sixth revision's insightful author, nor do we know what events shaped his views. Internal evidence, however, in the form of certain phrases that match passages in Layle Smith's unpublished letters, suggest that the author was a Seeker who had at some time worked in close consultation with the first High Seeker.

By reading the sixth revision with a careful eye, we can learn much about its author. He was evidently a man of great loyalty and generosity, who wished to give Layle Smith full credit for what he had accomplished. Yet he was also a man of forceful character and independence of mind, who was not afraid to depart from his master's work where he believed it to be in error. Indeed, despite the loss of all other information on the sixth revision's author, we know nearly as much about him as we do about Layle Smith.

It is said that what men are is more important than what men do. Yet perhaps it is the case that what men do ultimately determines what men are.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***Rebirth* 5**
AS A SEEKER

The year 356, the tenth month.

Some historians have argued in recent years that the first High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon deserves little or no credit for the astounding improvements in the handling of criminals that took place during his

lifetime. A man who began his life as a murderer and rapist, and who capped his achievements by going mad, does not merit the praise he has been given. Or so the argument goes.

Whichever side one takes in this debate over who did what, it is important to point out that what united the Seekers of the Eternal Dungeon's Golden Age is more important than what divided them – for one quality all Seekers shared. Much as modern historians would like to turn their heads in shame from this period, it is in the tale of Layle Smith's mental illness that we must seek the most shining example of this quality. . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

The body flopped down, its limbs sprawling asunder as it fell. It landed with a shudder, then lay still, its eyes staring blankly toward the ceiling.

Cursing, Weldon Chapman reached down and pulled the dead chicken back into the basket from which it had fallen. If the inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon must pile gifts at this doorway, he wished that they would at least have sense enough to give food that was cooked. Already the chicken was beginning to smell.

Pushing aside the basket with the unplucked chicken, he picked up a basket containing fruit and cheese and knocked lightly upon the door facing the outer dungeon. Beyond the door he heard nothing except silence, but the door swung open almost immediately to reveal a Seeker, his black hood hiding his face. Weldon noted the smooth youthfulness of the hand resting upon the doorpost.

He felt almost dizzy at the sense of being plunged into his past, but the memory cut off abruptly as the Seeker lifted his face-cloth, revealing himself to be Elsdon Taylor. Elsdon smiled at him – a weary smile – and gestured him into the plainly furnished Seeker's cell.

Weldon was about to raise his own face-cloth – a privilege of his friendship with the junior Seeker – when he noticed a second figure in the cell, sitting in a chair facing the door to the inner dungeon, his back to Weldon. His arms lay motionless upon the rests of the armchair.

"Is he . . . ?" Weldon could not finish the soft question aimed at Elsdon.

"He is alive," came the cool answer from the armchair, "and would appreciate your not acting as though he's a corpse."

Weldon became aware that he was still clutching the food basket. He thrust it onto a nearby book-counter and said, "I apologize, sir. I thought you were asleep."

"You did not. You thought I had gone mad. Well, I haven't. Not yet." The tall figure rose and turned toward Weldon. His face was naked.

Weldon felt his heart beat hard and wished he could remember, from his schooldays, the Vovimian curse of the torture-god. This honor of seeing the High Seeker naked-faced had nothing to do with the High Seeker's feelings for him, he reminded himself. Weldon was there as a carekeeper, and as such, the High Seeker must raise his face-cloth to him, in the same manner that he would raise his face-cloth to the dungeon healer. Layle Smith's intimate gesture had nothing to do with what had happened ten years ago. Nothing at all.

Layle – Weldon always thought of him as just Layle, even after all these years – gestured him into a seat, and Weldon realized belatedly that he had not responded to the High Seeker's bitter remark. Once Weldon was seated, the High Seeker returned to the armchair, which Elsdon had unobtrusively turned round for him. It was not the austere, straight-backed chair upon which the High Seeker had sat ten years before, Weldon realized. Instead, it had all the marks of being a comfortable chair Layle had obtained for his love-mate during the two years since Elsdon moved into the High Seeker's cell. That shook Weldon as nothing else here had.

Elsdon himself did not sit down. Instead he carried the basket over to the small serving area at the end of the sitting room and began unpacking it, keeping his back to the conversation. Layle, as usual, made no soft preliminaries.

"I approved to the Codifier your offer to help Mr. Taylor," he said, "but I cannot say I am happy about adding to your work hours. I have left you with a heavy enough burden as it is."

Weldon gave a small smile, then realized that Layle could not see it. Sweet blood, what must Layle think of him, leaving his face-cloth down after so generous a gesture? He pulled the cloth up with fumbling fingers, slipped it under the clips at the top of his head, and said, "Not so great a burden as you might think, sir. I'm not the High Seeker, after all. Any important decisions are awaiting your return." Too late, he wondered whether the thought of all this labor would break the High Seeker further. He added quickly, "Though the Codifier is able to take care of most such decisions in your absence. My job seems to consist solely of sitting around doing documentwork. I might as well sign papers here as at – the office."

He had nearly said, "your office," but decided in time that it would not help to remind Layle that the High Seeker's office lay empty of its true owner. The collection of gifts outside the door must be a painful enough reminder to Layle that the Eternal Dungeon was in a state of abnormality.

"You've done this work before." Elsdon's voice was slightly muffled. He was still turned toward the serving counter, sorting the food.

For a moment, Weldon could have cursed the young man for reminding Layle of this. The last time the High Seeker had been suspended from his duties, it had been for assaulting a prisoner. But then Weldon saw Layle's body relax at this reminder that the day supervisor of his dungeon was a competent substitute for the High Seeker. *Of course,* Weldon thought to himself. *Elsdon knows Layle Smith. He knows Layle better than I do.*

Layle persisted, though, saying, "I'm not pleased that you're neglecting your duties to your prisoners."

"I'm between prisoners at the moment, sir," Weldon responded. "Besides, my primary duty is to see that you get better and return to work."

The words echoed in his head, and he realized with dismay that they were all too close to words he had spoken ten years before. He waited rigidly to be ordered from the High Seeker's cell, but his tension was broken by laughter. "I rather think," said Elsdon, coming forward and placing a bowl full of cut fruit upon the High Seeker's knee, "that your task is to keep a certain frenzied young Seeker from having to search out the services of a mind healer."

For a moment, the horror of Elsdon's remark so overwhelmed Weldon that he forgot to breathe. Then he saw the faintest shadow of a smile touch Layle's lips, and he cursed himself again. The junior Seeker was skilled; Weldon had learned that when he had taken over Elsdon's training during Layle's earlier suspension. It had not occurred to him then that Elsdon's talent for knowing which light-hearted remark would reassure a prisoner could be extended into his private life.

Layle ignored the bowl on his knee, saying, "Mr. Taylor's burden is indeed a great one, and I'm grateful to you for being willing to lift it at least a little. He has been receiving broken sleep for the past fortnight—"

"Because you won't tell me when you wake up!" Elsdon sat down abruptly at Layle's feet and frowned up at the High Seeker. It was an incongruous image: a subservient posture joined with an expression that could only be held by someone who had mastery over his love-mate. It confirmed everything Weldon had already guessed about the nature of the relationship between these two.

He shifted uneasily in his chair.

Layle ignored him; his gaze was fastened upon Elsdon. "There is no need for you to share my pattern of sleeplessness. I have no duties at the moment; you have duties to your prisoner."

Weldon held his breath in the next moment, but Elsdon simply replied, "And how well do you think I can do my duties, going into my prisoner's cell each day, knowing that you won't care for yourself while I'm gone? If you refuse to let me share your sleeplessness, then all the gods of Vovim must know what else you're refusing to share with me."

Again the touch of a smile edged Layle's lips. For Weldon, it was like seeing a miracle occur twice in one day. "I doubt that the gore-loving gods of Vovim will take much notice of you. If I have any hope at all, it lies in that fact." Then, as though suddenly aware that he was stripping himself in the presence of a stranger, he turned his gaze back to Weldon and said, "Mr. Taylor refuses to follow common sense in this matter, so your duty will be to sit with me whenever I awake and keep me company until I feel ready to sleep."

Weldon nodded and was searching for a commonplace response to make when he felt his stomach jolt. The High Seeker had leaned forward. His green eyes were glitter-cold.

One of the jokes of the Eternal Dungeon was that Layle Smith had designed the Seekers' hoods, and that he had done so for the sole purpose of forcing prisoners to focus their attention upon his cold eyes. It was a joke that inevitably brought nervous laughter.

The High Seeker's voice was cold as well. "One other duty you have, and I cannot overstress how important this is. Under no circumstances shall you allow me to leave this cell, unless I am accompanied by Mr. Taylor. My

day and night guards are presently quartered in the rooms opposite to this one, in the outer dungeon. If I should attempt to leave here without Mr. Taylor, you are to call upon them for assistance to restrain me. That is an order."

Weldon dared not look toward Elsdon. Such a gesture would only remind the High Seeker that he was presently stripped of his power to give orders. Instead he said, "I understand, sir." Then he added more lightly, "It will be a relief to me to have you close at hand. Every day, matters come up that I wish I could receive your advice about."

Layle settled back into his chair; his expression had returned to its normal coolness. Weldon chanced a glance at Elsdon, who had pulled the fruit bowl from Layle's knee to prevent it from falling when the High Seeker leaned forward, but Elsdon kept his gaze averted from Weldon.

"What sort of problems have you been facing?" Layle asked.

"Small matters, not enough to bother the Codifier with. But . . . Well, take the matter of Mr. Rowan. Do you remember the prisoner you assigned him last month?"

Layle nodded. "A difficult man to search. How are matters proceeding there?"

"Ill, sir; the prisoner physically attacked Mr. Rowan yesterday. I gave Mr. Rowan permission to place the prisoner upon the rack, as all methods short of brute force seem to be failing to work. Mr. Rowan has asked leave to take the prisoner up to level ten on the rack. I know that you don't usually allow Seekers to take prisoners that high . . ."

His voice trailed off. He had seen the look in Layle's eyes. He waited for Layle's attention to return to him; then he realized, with a twist of the stomach, that it would not.

Layle's gaze was focussed, but not on him – not on anything in this room. He stared at that which was beyond the sight of the other men in the room, his eyes dancing slightly. His breath had grown rapid.

Elsdon rose slowly to his feet. He bent over and placed his hand on the High Seeker's shoulder, saying softly, "Layle . . . we have a guest."

For a breathless moment, nothing happened. Then the High Seeker blinked rapidly, as though he were emerging from deep water. Weldon looked away, trying to pretend that he had not been staring.

"I apologize, Mr. Chapman." The High Seeker's voice was abnormally deep; it was the voice he usually reserved for prisoners he was breaking. "I am sorry to have left you so abruptly. I'm sure you understand, though, that it was in the best interests of the dungeon for me to do so."

"Layle, that's folly!" Abandoning the fruit bowl to a table nearby, Elsdon dropped to his knees and took hold of the High Seeker's hands. "If you won't listen to me, listen to Mr. Bergsen! He says that you're endangering yourself by continuing to retreat further into your dreamings."

"Better that I should be endangered than that the other inhabitants of the dungeon should be." Layle's voice was crisp as he fixed Elsdon with his cool gaze. "And you of all people should know how great that danger is."

Elsdon opened his mouth, then pressed his lips tight together in a thin line, like a father whose anger has grown so great that he dare not continue scolding his child. After an awkward pause, the High Seeker said, "I'm rather tired. Mr. Chapman, if you will excuse me . . ."

"No need for you to ask permission to depart, sir," Weldon replied. "This is your home."

He hoped that Layle would take the hint. He had always found Layle's insistence upon formality to be oppressive. Layle was the sole Seeker who, when locked in a room filled only with fellow Seekers whom he had known for nearly twenty years, would not raise his face-cloth. Now, listening to Layle address him in formal language only seconds after he had linked eyes with Elsdon in the most intimate manner, Weldon thanked the fates that he had not been born with violence in his soul. He doubted he could have resisted the impulse to use it by now.

Which led to more unpleasant thoughts. He watched as the High Seeker silently disappeared into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him; then Weldon turned his attention to Elsdon. The junior Seeker rose to his feet with torpid movements. Taking the bowl of fruit over to the counter, he slid onto the stool there and buried his face in his hands.

Weldon came up behind him and placed his hand upon Elsdon's back, but when the junior Seeker raised his head, Weldon could think of nothing to say but, "You should sleep too."

Elsdon gave a half-smile. "I was just trying to decide whether it would be worth my effort to prepare some food for myself."

"Let me." Weldon allowed his voice to reveal his relief at finally having a task to do, and Elsdon laughed. He had all the energy of youth, the ability to spring back from weariness and tackle a problem anew. Examining Elsdon out of the corner of his eye, Weldon decided that matters must have reached a crisis indeed if Elsdon was welcoming assistance from him.

Bread lay on the counter. Weldon reached for it, saying, "Where do you keep your knives?"

"You'll have to tear it with your hands. We don't have any knives."

Weldon stopped abruptly in the midst of taking hold of the bread. He looked over at Elsdon, who was reaching for a metal wine bottle. "Is that necessary?" he asked the junior Seeker quietly.

"No. But he thinks it is. He made me get rid of anything here that he might use as a weapon."

Weldon sighed and let the bread drop from his hands. Pulling himself onto the second stool, he leaned onto the counter with his arms and contemplated the lines at the corners of Elsdon's eyes. He had no memory of those lines being there upon the young man's arrival at the Eternal Dungeon.

"Elsdon," he said, "how did this all start? During the time you and the High Seeker have been together, he has seemed more at peace than I have ever seen him before. Why now, of all times?"

Elsdon, trying to pull the cork from the bottle without assistance from a corkscrew, bit his lip before saying, "It started after I returned from Vovim."

Weldon was silent a moment before taking the bottle from Elsdon. "I can imagine that learning of Layle's past was a shock for you. It was a shock

for all of us, when he announced the truth upon his return—"

Elsdon shook his head. "It wasn't that. I was shocked, yes, but nothing I learned in Vovim changed my belief that I'd chosen the right man for my love-mate. The change was in Layle."

Weldon reached toward the cups – they were all made of unbreakable pewter, he noticed – and occupied himself with pouring the wine as Elsdon said, "Layle sent me to Vovim, knowing that I would be tortured there. He did it for the sake of the prisoners in Vovim, and he rightly knew that I would have agreed to the mission if I'd known in full what I was facing. That in itself wasn't the trouble. The trouble was that he hadn't told me before I left about his past, and when I learned from my torturer that Layle had gleefully abused prisoners when he was a young torturer in Vovim . . . When my torturer tried to persuade me that Layle had sent me to Vovim in order to murder me . . . All of this made my suffering twice as hard as it should have been."

"Did you tell him this?" Weldon asked, the wine forgotten. Like Elsdon, he was keeping his voice exceedingly low.

Elsdon gave something resembling a laugh. "Does one ever have to tell the High Seeker anything important? He knows, and this knowledge is what has been driving him to retreat from the real world. He has convinced himself that the harm he did me is only the first step in a campaign of destruction that he will inflict upon every inhabitant of this dungeon."

Weldon fingered the wine bottle for a minute before asking, "Do you believe he is a danger?"

Elsdon raised his gaze from the counter. "Do you?"

Weldon did not have to think before shaking his head. "He has been a Seeker for nearly twenty years, and in all that time he has broken from his duties only twice – both times under circumstances that anyone could forgive. If he hasn't lived out his dark past during all these years, I see no reason why he should do so now."

"Tell him that," Elsdon said, rubbing his palms across his face. "He won't listen to me."

"At least he has sense enough to keep you by his side."

"He has tried to send me away." Elsdon's voice was grim. Weldon felt incongruous laughter rise in his chest as he imagined the High Seeker attempting to throw out of his cell this stubborn young man. One might as well try to lift all the rocks of the cavern in which the Eternal Dungeon was housed.

He held back his smile and said, "Elsdon, these dreamings . . ."

"He has always had them, ever since he left Vovim as a young man. It's his mind's way of finding a substitute for the deeds he committed there."

"I'd guessed that. Nobody has ever known in detail what the High Seeker's dreamings are, but since they happen most often when he is torturing prisoners, it's easy enough to guess their dark nature. But now . . . Elsdon, the High Seeker has never before allowed his dreamings to interfere with his work, nor has he needed another person to call him back to this world. In the past, his spells of unawareness lasted no more than the space of a breath or two, and then he would draw back from his dreamings of his own will. That he should have to take healing leave because his dreamings have become so frequent . . ."

Elsdon did not look up from where he sat, hunched over the counter. "If you asked Layle, he would say that he asked the Codifier to suspend him from his duties because he believes that he can no longer control his actions. He believes he is in danger of torturing and raping and murdering every person in the Eternal Dungeon."

"That's what the High Seeker says. And the dungeon healer?"

"Mr. Bergsen says what I say: Layle's only danger is that he is retreating more and more into the dungeon of his dreamings. He is losing his mind, Weldon."

Elsdon's voice ended in a choke. Weldon laid his hand upon the junior Seeker's arm. After a long while he said, "He has you. That's the best guarantee that he won't leave us altogether."

"He has me only half the day. The other half I spend with my prisoner, or doing work connected with my prisoner." Elsdon raised his head and took

a deep breath. "I'm planning to ask the Codifier to relieve me of my duties to my prisoner."

Weldon felt a chill enter him. He tried to ignore it for the moment, saying, "I thought your searching of the prisoner was going well."

"I think it is. I know that Layle will be angry with me – he assigned the prisoner to me because he thought I was the best Seeker for the job. But Weldon, I can't let Layle slip further into his dreamings. If putting my prisoner aside can help him . . ."

The chill increased. Weldon reached for the cheese on the counter and said, "Elsdon – did Layle ever tell you how it was that our friendship ended?"

Elsdon was silent a long moment, and then, with the devastating directness that he had shown in his training as a Seeker, he replied, "No. Nor how your love-bond ended."

Weldon swallowed back his next words. He stared down at the cup, dark with wine and with his memories.

o—o—o

Weldon Chapman was ten years older than Layle Smith. As far as he knew during his early years in the dungeon, he was also more experienced in the ways of the world. The High Seeker, judging from his accent, had lived the privileged life of a gentle-born boy during his childhood, while Weldon had been forced to struggle as a commoner.

None of this made any difference when the young High Seeker invited Weldon to his cell two years after Weldon became a Seeker, and announced, without preliminary, that he was in love with Weldon.

Not until much later would Weldon ask himself whether he had been in love with Layle Smith. It seemed an irrelevant consideration. The High Seeker had chosen him, out of all the other Seekers, as his love-mate. Weldon's spirit soared.

It remained at a height for several minutes as the High Seeker spoke of how his love had grown for Weldon and of what he hoped to give him.

Layle Smith even went so far as to say that he was honored to learn that Weldon shared his feelings.

Then he asked Weldon whether he would mind being tied up.

The shock that went through Weldon then brought him close to vomiting. Worldly-wise as he was, he knew that such things took place – in brothels and other sordid houses of wickedness. Weldon had certainly witnessed worse than that in the cramped tenement buildings where he had lived as a child. But his parents had been good, upright people who made clear to him that poverty was no excuse for iniquity. Their relationship to one another had been that of pure, gentle love. That they should find it necessary to bind one another in order to make love was a ludicrous idea. That Weldon should take part in such an exercise was a sickening notion.

Because of the friendship they had established several months before, both Weldon and the High Seeker had raised their face-cloths to one another at the start of the conversation. The High Seeker was too good at his work not to be able to read the expression on Weldon's face. There was a long pause, unbroken by Weldon. Then carefully, painstakingly, the High Seeker explained that he thought he might be able to make love to another human being in this way, but in no other way.

Later – far too much later – Weldon would realize the implication behind Layle's words: that the High Seeker had never made love to anyone. At the time, Weldon could only conclude that the High Seeker was gravely ill in the mind and required his assistance. He broke his silence finally to tell Layle eagerly that he would help him to find assistance for his trouble – that he would make arrangements for him to meet with a mind healer so that he could rid himself of these terrible impulses.

Not until ten years later, during a conversation with Elsdon Taylor, would Weldon learn that the first step Layle had undertaken when he arrived at the Eternal Dungeon was to consult with the dungeon healer about ridding himself of his dark desires. With Mr. Bergsen's assistance, Layle had consulted with the finest mind healers in the queendom.

The last mind healer to meet with him, three years after Layle's arrival, had been the Queen's own private healer. The man had finally shaken his head and said that, if Layle wished to break down in both mind and body,

he should continue in his present course of trying to rid himself of his desires. Such healings could take place where the desires had come about through trauma or deliberate decision, but it was clear to the royal healer that Layle's desires lay too deep for such change. If he persisted in trying to rid himself of them, he would destroy himself. The only safe course Layle Smith could take, the healer suggested, was to find a way to shape his desires in order to gift others.

This Layle had already trained himself to do in his work, letting his dark desires manifest themselves only when they would help his prisoner. But could he turn his darkness into a form of love?

The High Seeker explained none of this to Weldon. He simply pulled down his face-cloth, thanked Weldon for his consideration, and led him to the door.

It was the last time that Weldon would visit the High Seeker's cell for ten years.

o—o—o

"He made two more tries," Weldon said, staring down at the mess of shreddings that had resulted from his attempts to slice the cheese with a spoon. "First he approached an elderly Seeker – I suppose he thought the man would be less shocked at his proposal. He was right. The man was amused; he spread the story far and wide, embellishing the tale considerably, so as to add to Layle's already formidable reputation as the darkest Seeker in the Eternal Dungeon. Later, when the High Seeker made the most tentative of proposals to a Seeker who was about to complete his training, that Seeker was so terrified by the stories he'd heard about the High Seeker's sexuality that he fled the dungeon, which resulted in an explosion of rumors that the High Seeker had raped him. . . . At least I was discreet. If nothing else."

Elsdon, resting his head upon his arms as he listened, said, "I'm glad you told me this. I'd heard bits of the tale from Layle, but he wouldn't tell me the parts that were private between you two. I'm not sure, though, why you're recounting this now."

"Because," said Weldon, "that wasn't the end of my private relationship with the High Seeker. The day after I spurned his offer of love, he appeared at my door, and when I let him into my cell he raised his face-cloth. I realized afterwards that he had decided that, however painful it might be for him to continue seeing me privately, he had no right to withdraw any part of himself I had not rejected. I had rejected his love, so he offered me his friendship." Weldon took a longer look at the mangled cheese and pushed it aside with a jerk of the hand. "I was fool enough to bring up the topic of his dark desires again. I told him that, if he refused to see a mind healer, I would help him myself – I would spend every minute of my days ridding him of his desire to overmaster his bed partners. As though I had any qualifications for healing. . . . He was polite to me; he told me that would interfere with my duties to my prisoners. I said, 'I don't care. You're more important to me than any prisoner.'"

Elsdon sucked in his breath. Weldon nodded. "He left my cell quicker than a whiplash. That was the end of our friendship. I was angry at first; only gradually did I realize that he'd withdrawn from me as much for my sake as for my prisoners'. He was keeping me from breaking my oath as a Seeker."

Elsdon stared down at the counter, tracing the woodgrain with his finger. He said softly, "I would gladly give up what I have with Layle if it would help him."

"But you know that it would not. You're the only person who knows how to call him back from his dreamings; without you, he would withdraw further into his dreamings. And if you place his interests above that of your prisoner . . ."

Elsdon closed his eyes and nodded. After a while he said, "Thank you, Weldon. Without your advice, I would have made a calamitous decision."

His eyes remained closed. Weldon touched his shoulder and said, "Sleep. If the High Seeker has need of you, I'll wake you."

The junior Seeker nodded and rose to his feet. His movements were lethargic, and he was already covering a yawn before he turned away. Watching him go, Weldon thought to himself that the young man had endured too heavy a weight for too long.

All the more reason for Elsdon not to know that Weldon hated him.

Weldon set to work nibbling at the pile of food that Elsdon had abandoned. It was a shame – a sweetly bloody shame. Elsdon deserved all the praise that could be given for the way in which he supported Layle. He had accepted duties that no one should be asked to undertake toward a love-mate.

It was not Elsdon's fault that he held the place which Weldon could have held. And Weldon would do all he could to prevent Layle's love-mate from guessing what black jealousy poisoned Weldon's feelings for him.

The High Seeker knew. He must know; nothing took place in the Eternal Dungeon that he did not know of. Weldon could guess that this was why he had been accepted as second carekeeper to the High Seeker: because Layle hoped to heal Weldon's injured feelings and jealousy.

For Elsdon's sake. Not Weldon's.

So unworthy a thought was this that Weldon turned away from the counter, seeking some way in which to distract his mind. It occurred to him that he had forgotten to bring documentwork, through which he had planned to occupy the long hours that Layle was asleep. He would have to remedy that the next day. In the meantime, this cell was well stocked with books—

He hesitated on the point of pulling a book off the shelf. Every book before him, he suddenly realized, was about imprisonment or torture. In any other Seeker's cell, he would have regarded these books as professional reading. Not here. What if Layle had lined the margins with private thoughts brought out by his reading? The very thought of what Weldon might read made his skin chill.

Elsdon would know whether it was safe to read the books. Maybe some of these books were his. Any notes from Elsdon about torture, Weldon knew, would be dryly professional. Cautiously he moved toward the door of the bedroom. It was still open a crack; perhaps Elsdon had not yet gone to bed.

Weldon stopped at the doorway. Through the crack he could see the two-person bed at the far end of the bedroom; on it sat Elsdon. He was stripped

for bed, and he was cradling Layle, who had his head buried upon Elsdon's shoulder. Weldon could see the bloodline beating lightly in Layle's neck.

Weldon turned away. On second thought, he had no need for a book. What he had just seen would distract him from any reading during the hours to come.

And blacken his night's sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Heads turned as Weldon walked down the corridor. He tried to ignore them. It did no good; he saw one of the dungeon's lamplighters step toward him, eager interest in his face. Weldon gave him an icy stare, as best he could from through his hood. The man took the hint and stepped back. One man conquered; several hundred men and women left.

Another man was headed toward him – this one a Seeker. Bloody blades; a Seeker wouldn't be put off by cold expressions. Weldon turned and began walking in the opposite direction. He could no longer remember where he was headed. It hardly mattered.

He passed a guard. Bracing himself, he looked over at the passerby – a man with quiet eyes, about his own age – but the guard simply nodded a greeting at him and passed.

Weldon turned and caught hold of him. As the guard looked back, Weldon said, "You didn't ask."

"I assumed that if anything important had happened, you would have announced it," the guard replied.

"You're the only one who has assumed that," Weldon said grimly. He glanced round at the peering gazes and decided that an armed guard was just what he needed. "Come walk with me," he said in a low voice to Seward Sobel, the High Seeker's senior night guard. "We can talk on the way to your destination."

"My destination is wandering aimlessly in circles, feeling useless," Mr. Sobel said with a quirk of a smile.

Despite himself, Weldon felt the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. "Mine as well."

They travelled for some time in silence. The dungeon was abnormally quiet; even the prisoners seemed to have caught hold of the atmosphere of waiting. After a while, Mr. Sobel said, "There's no change, then?"

"Only for the worse." Weldon kept his voice soft. He was conscious of eyes following his progress. "He hasn't slept for two days. He has replaced

sleep with his dreamings."

Mr. Sobel let out his breath slowly. "Is he in bed now, then?"

Weldon shook his head. "In a prisoner's cell." As Mr. Sobel turned startled eyes toward him, he added, "With Mr. Taylor. Mr. Taylor is continuing to search his prisoner each day, and of course he can't allow Mr. Smith to remain alone during that time."

"Of course," murmured Mr. Sobel. He cast a look at Weldon, and Weldon wondered whether the blackened skin under his eyes showed through the eye-holes of his hood. The guard said, "At least Mr. Taylor has managed to convince him that it's folly to withdraw into his dreamings."

"The knowledge comes too late to be of use to him." Weldon felt his hands tighten. "He can no longer stop himself from entering into his dreamings. They have overmastered him."

This was old news; the guard made no reply. They had taken a dozen more steps before Weldon hissed, "This is my fault."

Mr. Sobel offered a look of query, and Weldon added, "I advised Mr. Taylor two months ago to continue searching his prisoner. I thought it was what the High Seeker wanted. But those long hours while Mr. Taylor is searching the prisoner are the hours when Mr. Smith is most likely to enter into his dreamings. If I had not meddled . . ."

Mr. Sobel, seeing a fellow guard begin to approach, put his hand lightly to his dagger. The other guard raised his eyebrows but stayed back. Mr. Sobel waited until they were beyond the intruder before saying, "Sir, one thing I've learned in my years of working with the High Seeker is that, if he wants something, no power in life or death will hold him from taking it."

"And what he wants is for Mr. Taylor to place the best interests of his prisoner first." Weldon sighed. "Mr. Sobel, am I the only man who finds it ironic that the High Seeker is being unmade by his sense of duty as a Seeker? This is not how one would expect the darkest Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon to destroy himself."

Mr. Sobel was silent a moment before saying, "Perhaps I can talk to him – make him see that the prisoners of the Eternal Dungeon will be far worse

off if he is lost than if Mr. Taylor transfers his prisoner to another Seeker."

Weldon said wearily, "You can try. He hasn't spoken to anyone but Mr. Taylor for days, but perhaps he will listen to you. . . . If that bloody prisoner would only confess!" He caught Mr. Sobel's look and said more quietly, "I know – that isn't a Seekerly remark, is it? I ought to be hoping that Mr. Taylor's patient questioning will reveal information that will save his prisoner from the hangman. If the prisoner— What the bloody blades . . . ?"

He had been alerted, not by what stood forth in the corridor, but by Mr. Sobel's hand moving to his dagger. Weldon found himself looking around automatically to see which other guards were close by. That was old training. The last time he had witnessed this scene, a prisoner had murdered his Seeker.

Elsdon Taylor's night guards were not in front of his cell. That in itself was not unusual; the guards might be inside the cell, assisting Elsdon with a punishment. But the junior night guard was standing in front of the cell next door, peering through the tiny watch-hole. As Weldon and Mr. Sobel ran forward, he looked up and said to the Seeker, "Oh, sir, I'm glad you're here! Mr. Taylor told me to call him if there was any change, and I'm not sure—"

Weldon elbowed him aside, and in the next moment he underwent a feeling he had not experienced in twelve years. The last time had been when he was in training, and was placed on the rack.

"Get Mr. Taylor!" he snapped at Elsdon's guard, but when he turned his head, he saw that Elsdon had already left his prisoner's cell and was running forward. Mr. Sobel, the most alert of guards, had finished unlocking the cell in front of which Weldon was standing. The High Seeker's guard waited until Weldon stepped back; then he swung the door open.

By this time, a small crowd had gathered. And so it was that Weldon did not need to issue his next report to the dungeon. Which was just as well; it was a scene he could not have easily put into words.

Elsdon dropped down to one knee before the High Seeker, who was curled in a ball upon the floor. He spoke softly the High Seeker's name and touched his hooded head. The High Seeker turned his eyes toward Elsdon. But the eyes were blurred with visions, and the rest of his body did not move. He remained as he was, staring blankly at Elsdon, as somewhere behind Weldon, one of the onlookers began to sob.

"Fetch Mr. Bergsen," Weldon said quietly to Mr. Sobel, and then he did the only other thing he could: he closed the cell door, leaving the High Seeker alone with his love-mate.

o—o—o

Elsdon Taylor was worried about his prisoner. Though inexperienced as a Seeker, he sensed that the prisoner was reaching a breaking point – but whether it was the breaking point Elsdon sought, he wasn't sure. It might have been the wrong sort of breaking, the type that would drive the prisoner back from all the progress they had made together. And if such a breaking occurred, it would be Elsdon's fault, for allowing the High Seeker to stay in the cell during the prisoner's searching.

The prisoner was terrified of the High Seeker, that was clear. How could he not be, witnessing Layle as he was sucked into his dreamings each day? And so, when Layle shattered in the midst of a searching and flung away his writing board – it landed mere inches from the prisoner – Elsdon knew that he was faced with the crisis he had envisioned in his nightmares: he must choose between helping his prisoner and helping Layle.

When he went over to Layle, the High Seeker whispered to him that he would attack the prisoner in the next moment. Elsdon knew there was no truth to this; if Layle had not attacked anyone by now, he never would. But Layle was frantic to be away from the prisoner, the prisoner was frantic to be away from Layle, and Elsdon had no idea what he should do.

"Lock me in a cell," Layle begged in a whisper. "Now!"

And so Elsdon did. He placed Layle in the neighboring cell and sent his senior day guard to fetch Weldon Chapman. Since Weldon was on duty, the guard should be able to find the senior Seeker within a few minutes. Elsdon debated staying with Layle until then, but Layle was hoarsely

exhorting him to return to his prisoner, and Elsdon found himself wondering whether his few minutes' absence from the cell would destroy months' worth of work. And if it did, and he must search the prisoner yet longer, at Layle's expense . . .

He returned to the cell, but not for long. The prisoner's anxiety had grown to such a degree that he refused to permit the searching to continue that day. Under ordinary circumstances, Elsdon would have coaxed him into continuing; a prisoner could not be allowed to decide when he was or wasn't searched. But these weren't ordinary circumstances. Elsdon left the cell, relieved to be able to return to Layle.

He was too late.

o—o—o

Layle Smith's head did not move. It remained turned, at an awkward angle, toward the bedroom doorway, through which could be seen the figures of Elsdon Taylor and the dungeon healer, leaning toward one another as they talked in low voices. Layle, normally a man who could not bear to be talked about without participating in the conversation, stared with glassy eyes at the exchange and remained where he was, seated in the armchair placed in the bedroom.

Weldon realized that he was staring, and tried to occupy himself by examining the night-table where Elsdon had placed Layle's hood. It contained several other items belonging to the High Seeker, lit by the lamp above the bed. In the midst of them lay a familiar black volume.

Weldon flipped open the book and realized, in the next moment, that in this book were the marginal notes that he had dreaded. The notes consisted of a single word, repeated over and over: "Yes."

"The best interests of the prisoner must always be placed first." "Yes." "At all times a Seeker must put aside his own feelings and needs for the sake of the prisoner." "Yes." "A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners." "Yes, yes, yes."

Weldon looked up at Layle. The High Seeker had shown no interest in this inspection of his private belongings – had not even turned his head to look

at Weldon. His gaze remained fixed on Elsdon.

Weldon laid the *Code of Seeking* softly down, then noticed the pitcher and cup on the night-table. A second glance told him that Layle's lips were cracked and dry.

As the corridor door closed behind the dungeon healer, Weldon poured a cup of water, then stepped over to the High Seeker. Layle did not resist as Weldon lifted the cup to his lips, any more than he had resisted when Weldon and Elsdon had pulled him to his feet in the empty cell and guided him back to his own quarters, through silent, staring crowds of dungeon inhabitants.

"No!" The cry came from the doorway as Weldon began to tip the cup. In the same moment, with a swift blow, Layle knocked the cup from Weldon's hand, drenching Weldon and the floor nearby. Layle's gaze did not move from the doorway.

Elsdon came forward to hand Weldon his dry handkerchief. "He won't drink," he said in a weary voice. "Vovimian torturers won't drink unless they've prepared the drink themselves. The drink might be poisoned."

Weldon looked over at Layle, whose head had finally turned. The High Seeker was watching the progress of the junior Seeker, though Layle's blank eyes saw more than what was in this room. "Did he tell you that?" Weldon asked.

"No," said Elsdon, kneeling down to wipe off the water from Layle's lap. "My torturer did."

Weldon's hand paused in the midst of tossing away the soaked handkerchief. Elsdon's head was bowed as he did his work, but in the light from the bed-lamp, Weldon could see the dark smudges under the other Seeker's eyes. Two days Layle had gone without sleep; two days Elsdon had gone without sleep.

Sweet blood, the young man had undergone too much in life already. Bound and beaten by his father every week for fourteen years; sent to the Eternal Dungeon as a prisoner and placed on trial for his life; tortured and

raped in Vovim; and now this. How long would it be before Elsdon also broke down under the weight he was carrying?

Weldon found himself wishing that pity had the power to destroy envy. He could feel the black jealousy still. It was there with each dab of Elsdon's cloth as he wiped Layle's lap; it was there as the junior Seeker rose, leaning upon Layle's motionless arm to support himself; it was there as he pushed back the hair from Layle's eyes. It was there as Layle's gaze remained unwavering upon his love-mate.

Weldon came over to Elsdon and gently forced the junior Seeker to sit down on his bed. Glancing at the High Seeker again, Weldon asked, "Can he hear us?"

Elsdon nodded. His own gaze had not moved from Layle from the moment he had entered the bedroom. "He's like this when we're together. When we make love. He can see us and hear us; he's incorporating bits of our conversation and actions into his dreamings."

Weldon tried to imagine which of his actions during the past few minutes Layle would use; then he felt his stomach roil at the thought. He looked toward the sitting room, but Elsdon, noticing his movement out of the corner of his eye, said softly, "I don't want to leave him by himself. We may be the only thing that's keeping the door open for him between his dreamings and this world."

"My presence or absence is of no importance. You're what's keeping him here." Weldon sat down heavily beside Elsdon on the bed. After several minutes of silence, he asked quietly, "What does Mr. Bergsen say?"

"That he can do nothing more for the High Seeker. That we can only wait. For as long as we have."

"As long as we—?" Weldon's gaze shifted abruptly to the pitcher, sitting abandoned on the floor next to Layle. "Elsdon," he said slowly, "when did he last drink?"

"This evening, before I went on duty." Elsdon's hands were tight fists in his lap. "He wasn't hungry, but I made him drink a cup of water – just in case."

Weldon said nothing more. Elsdon knew how long a man could survive without water; during the young Seeker's training, Weldon had told him the methodology of foreign torturers, since Vovim's torturers used such deprivation as a form of torture. Brief torture.

It was like seeing a hangman walk into the room. So little time left.

For a moment, he envisioned himself pouring water down the throat of the resisting High Seeker; then he shook himself away from that thought. This was not Vovim, where food and drink was forced on those who resisted. Making the High Seeker feel that he was a Vovimian prisoner could well ensure that his mind never returned to this world. Weldon did not have to ask to know that Layle would prefer death to endless madness.

"Can I do anything to help?" Weldon asked, trying to keep desperation out of his voice.

Elsdon nodded, not shifting his eyes from his love-mate. "I need guards at the doors to this cell for the next few hours."

"I'll see that they're set here," Weldon replied promptly. "No one is likely to disturb you, though."

"I need you to give the guards orders that no one, not even themselves, must enter this cell. Not under any circumstances."

Layle's eyes danced, shifting past Elsdon to something behind him. Under the light from the lamp on the wall above the bed, his eyes glowed, like that of a predatory cat.

Weldon said, "Elsdon, this is a matter for the Codifier."

"I spoke to him a few days ago. He gave me permission to take whatever measures I considered necessary – if all else failed."

Elsdon's tone was as weary as before; his own lips were parched. Weldon spent a long moment watching Layle, whose gaze was still caught upon something invisible behind Elsdon. Then Weldon laid his hand on the young man's arm. "I'll set the High Seeker's own guards at duty here," he said quietly. "You won't be disturbed."

Elsdon nodded. As Weldon got up and walked to the door leading to the outer dungeon, he glanced back. Elsdon had not moved. He remained where he was, his gaze fixed upon Layle's dancing eyes.

Weldon felt something touch his envy, nudging it.

CHAPTER THREE

Elsdon knelt and reached toward the flap of Layle's trousers. He could feel the sweat turning chill upon his own naked skin and found himself wishing he was back in the cell with the murderer he had been questioning. He had a better chance of surviving such an encounter.

Never before had Elsdon tried to change one of Layle's dreamings once the dreaming had begun. He hoped his experiment would pull Layle's mind out of the dreaming – but what if Layle regarded this as an opportunity to pull Elsdon into the dreaming? Layle could not bring his love-mate's mind into the dungeon where the High Seeker presently dwelt as a Vovimian torturer, but he could certainly duplicate what he was doing there to Elsdon's body.

Elsdon's hands were shaking so much by the time he finished untying the flap that he had to slide them between his legs in an effort to steady them. He looked for a moment at the results of what he had done. He was not surprised to see that Layle's shaft remained flaccid. Despite what everyone in the Eternal Dungeon thought, Elsdon knew that the High Seeker's dark desires were more a matter of the mind than of the body. Layle had once said dryly that the prospect of castration was not as fearful to him as it was to most men, since his dreamings would continue in any case.

But now Elsdon had no choice but to reach the body, for if he could not get the body to respond, then he had no hope of drawing Layle's mind back. His hands were still shaking within his legs. He tried to brace himself with thoughts of the *Code of Seeking*, as he had on the first day that, as a Seeker, he had walked alone into a prisoner's cell.

He tilted his head to look up at the High Seeker. Elsdon had replenished the oil in the three lamps in the bedroom: the scene before him was as starkly lit as that of a furnace-warmed cell. Layle had not moved since he dashed the cup from Weldon's hand. Some vestige of will held him upright and kept his eyes fastened upon Elsdon, following him wherever he moved in the room. It was the only remaining thread left between Layle and the real world, and if Elsdon did not move forward soon, even this thread might be cut.

Still Elsdon could not make himself lean forward. His whole body was beginning to shake. Sweet blood, was his love of Layle so small as this?

It had been easier the first time.

o—o—o

Elsdon knelt naked at Layle Smith's feet. He had never been so terrified in his life.

He was not scared of the High Seeker. How could he be, when only minutes before he had cradled Layle in his arms as the High Seeker choked out all the words of love he had stored within during his lonely life? No, Layle would not hurt him; Layle was not Elsdon's father. But Layle might lose interest in him, if he learned how ignorant his new love-mate was.

Elsdon felt sweat trickle down his back. He wished now that he had paid more attention to the other boys at school when they gathered in sniggering bunches at recess. His father had never approved of such talk – "Filthy-minded children sullying the purity of marriage," he called it – and so Elsdon had done his best to avoid listening, even though his father never explained to him what pure acts took place in marriage.

He could not avoid overhearing altogether, and so he had a general sense of what happened when a man and woman lay together, and he gathered that matters were not so different when a man and a man lay together. But beyond that . . .

He tilted his head cautiously, looking up at Layle. The High Seeker's pupils were enormous, as though he were absorbing all the light in the world. His gaze remained fixed upon Elsdon; his hand lightly touched the back of Elsdon's head. Layle did not speak. Elsdon wondered what he was seeing. He wondered whether any part of Layle remained in this world. Did Layle even remember that he was there?

His own gaze dropped to the sight before him, and he swallowed. It had been in all his dreamings, to see Layle like this, but he had not imagined doing so on his knees. What the bloody blades was he supposed to do in this position? No doubt any boy at his old school could have educated him.

Any other eighteen-year-old would have known what was expected of him, without having to be told.

Not Elsdon, though. He might as well have been a sheltered virgin bride on her wedding night. Any moment now Layle would guess that Elsdon had no idea what he was supposed to do, and then, Elsdon greatly feared, contempt would enter into Layle's expression.

Elsdon had no illusions that Layle would cast him off if that happened. No one else wanted the High Seeker. But Elsdon did not wish to be Layle's love-mate simply because the High Seeker could find no other. He wanted to be worthy of the High Seeker's love, to be a man whom Layle trusted and respected.

Layle remained motionless. He was evidently waiting for Elsdon to do the obvious. Elsdon felt tears prick at his eyes. Any moment now, Layle would guess . . .

"Kiss them."

It took a minute for Elsdon's mind to absorb the fact that Layle had spoken. His voice was deeper than usual, though soft. Elsdon felt panic clutch at him. Kiss them. Kiss *them*? What the bloody blades did Layle mean? There was only one . . .

Oh. Elsdon's gaze shifted downward slightly, and he felt heat cover his face. No doubt his blush was visible. Layle must be able to see that Elsdon had not understood his instructions. And now that he knew the depths of Elsdon's ignorance . . .

It took all of Elsdon's strength to keep from fleeing the room in shame. He tried to steady himself, drawing long breaths. He knew now what to do. Layle had given him an order. Layle had asked Elsdon's permission beforehand to give him orders. All that Elsdon need do was follow the order. Then another order would come—

It hit Elsdon then, like a lash across the back. He had forgotten, until this moment, that he was a Seeker-in-Training.

The first stages of his training had been the happiest time in his life. The High Seeker had demonstrated no contempt for the fact that Elsdon did not

yet know the ways of being a Seeker. On the contrary, Layle had seemed pleased to be able to instruct his student in the Seekers' mysteries. Elsdon guessed that Layle was a born teacher, someone who enjoyed guiding a student onto new paths.

It was no different here. Layle must have guessed Elsdon's ignorance – perhaps that was even part of Elsdon's appeal to him. *Men like bedding virgins,* someone had told Elsdon not long before. Layle above all, for this would give him the opportunity to guide Elsdon onto new paths. And Elsdon need not try to guess what he should or shouldn't do. Layle would tell him.

"You needn't do this if you would prefer not to."

Layle's voice was so soft that Elsdon could barely hear him. Looking up, Elsdon saw that Layle's eyes remained opaque. But the High Seeker's hand had begun to gently stroke his hair. He was awaiting Elsdon's answer.

At that moment, Elsdon felt desire enter so strongly into him that he could not breathe. Wherever else Layle might be, he was also here, in this room, filled with concern for his love-mate. He was here, ready to instruct if his love-mate wished, or ready to pull back if Elsdon wanted, even though it meant returning to a life of celibacy. Everything that would happen here was Elsdon's choice, and he knew that he need do nothing but give his consent. Layle would do the rest.

Elsdon smiled up at the High Seeker. "I don't want to stop," he told his love-mate.

Then kiss them. Kiss the most vulnerable part of me. I trust you not to hurt me or despise me.

Layle did not speak the words. He did not need to. Feeling his desire take him prisoner once more, Elsdon leaned forward to follow Layle's order.

o—o—o

This wasn't working. Layle was not responding, either in body or mind; he sat motionless, his gaze fixed upon Elsdon as his love-mate knelt between his knees. Whatever Layle was seeing was being drawn into the dungeon of his dreaming. He was not being drawn back.

Which left Elsdon with only one recourse. Wiping the sweat from his palms onto his equally sweaty legs, he paused, his head bowed, sucking in deep breaths. He could do this. He had done it once before for Layle; he could do it again.

But Layle had not been present on the previous occasion. That made all the difference.

Elsdon realized finally that his terror would not subside; he must drive himself onward, despite the sickness in his stomach. Rising to his feet, he walked over to the bed, leaned over the top right-hand corner of the hard mattress, and pulled from its hiding place the rack-strap he had tied to the bed leg four days before.

As he laid its free end upon the bed, he had a moment to remember the bemusement he had felt during the early days of his training, when he first realized that the abuse he had undergone at his father's hands made him uniquely qualified for his work as a Seeker. Not even Layle knew as much about bindings as Elsdon did: which bindings tightened when sweat shrank them, which bindings cut off all blood and ran the risk of killing hands and feet, which bindings were strong but soft. His father had tried various bindings on him over the years, seeking the ones that would hurt him least; with the distance of compassion, Elsdon could be grateful for that now. Layle had plumbed him for his knowledge, then had ordered the straps of the racks changed accordingly, to lessen the danger of permanent injury to the prisoners.

Elsdon glanced at the inside of the strap's cuff, which was padded to provide flexibility as the rack tightened. It was a mercy no Vovimian torturer would offer his prisoner, and Elsdon hoped this would not prove a problem. But if Layle's dreaming could turn the bed into a rack, presumably it could turn Yclau straps into Vovimian ones.

Elsdon finished pulling the fourth strap from its hiding place and paused to look down. He wondered again whether he should supply a gag. It would be hard to remain silent on his own, but he knew from experience that a gag was far more dangerous a piece of equipment than any other. Even the Vovimian torturers did not use it. His father had, and Elsdon had nearly died one night when his nose grew so stuffed from his sobbing that he

could barely breathe through it. No, he would have to depend on his will to keep back the screams.

He returned to where Layle sat, watching the preparations without apparent interest. Elsdon gently pulled the High Seeker to his feet. Layle swayed slightly but remained upright. Then Elsdon carefully removed Layle's clothes. The High Seeker liked to stay half-dressed during their lovemaking, in the manner of the King's Torturers, but Elsdon had never been certain how Layle managed to keep his unbelted trousers from slipping to his ankles during his most vigorous movements. Elsdon was not sure that Layle would know how to accomplish the trick in this state.

Elsdon was shaking again long before he finished. He pulled the belt from Layle's trousers, then dropped the trousers on the floor and placed the belt in Layle's hand. Layle clutched it in an automatic manner, like a child given his favorite toy. The bed-lamp light had died out by now; under the remaining light in the room, Layle's eyes were opaque.

"Love," Elsdon said softly, "you don't need to remain in your dreamings. Whatever it is that you're doing to me there, you can do to me here. I give you my permission. I'd rather have you here, doing whatever it is you're drawn to do, than have you away from me. Do you understand?"

There was no reply. Elsdon waited a moment, his gaze linked with Layle's glassy gaze. Then he turned and walked to the bed. He had to walk quickly; his knees were ready to give way.

He placed one of the pillows in the middle of the bed, then lay stomach-down, with his groin upon the pillow. It was an awkward position, but he could guess how Layle would want to finish his session. Elsdon spread his arms and legs as though they were wings, then turned his head to look back.

He felt his skin jump as he did so. Without sound, Layle had followed him to the bed; he was standing there now, looking down. His gaze slid across his love-mate's body, like an ember scalding Elsdon's skin. The belt was no longer in his hands.

Elsdon felt his stomach tighten as he realized this. He had hoped that Layle would take the hint from being handed the belt; Elsdon knew well

enough that he had cleared the cell only of such items as an ordinary man might use as weapons. Layle was not an ordinary man. He was the most skilled torturer in the world, far more gifted than the man who had tortured Elsdon in Vovim. This would be worse.

Elsdon squeezed his eyelids shut at this thought. A moment later, he felt Layle's hand touch his right wrist, and then the cuff slid over his hand, tightening as Layle adjusted the length of the strap. Elsdon kept his eyes closed, breathing slowly. Since his return from Vovim, he had relived a thousand times inwardly the final day of his capture, when Master Aeden had succeeded in breaking him through nothing more than a binding. The ease of his breaking had humiliated Elsdon; he had been determined to train his mind to be stronger.

The fourth strap was tightened, causing his body to grow so taut that the part of him that remained with his childhood wondered whether anyone would be able to untie the knots afterwards. He was panting now, struggling to keep all sounds within him. He could feel the strain upon his arms and legs, his shoulder-blades and hips, but these sensations came to him dimly through the horror of feeling himself bound again.

He opened his eyes, hoping that the sight of Layle's blank eyes would remind him of why he was doing this. He found that Layle was standing next to the bed, frowning slightly, as though trying to recall something important. Layle's gaze glided over him again, lingering upon the mutilations left on his flesh from his father's beatings. The High Seeker's shaft began to stir.

Elsdon, gulping in air with light moans, felt a stillness fall over his soul. He waited.

Layle's eyes did not change, but in the next moment he spoke. "No," he said slowly, in the manner of a professional reaching a conclusion about his work. "No, this isn't right." He reached upward.

The sound of an explosion followed. Plaster and sawdust fell upon Elsdon as he sucked in more air, causing him to choke and cough. He twisted in his bonds, trying to see what Layle had done. Then he heard a shattering and caught a glimpse of the broken lamp upon the floor.

The High Seeker bent his body. When he rose again, he was delicately holding a piece of jagged glass.

It took a moment for Elsdon to realize what Layle was about to do; then Elsdon could no longer hold back his cries. *"No!"* he screamed, his voice choking on the words. "No, please, Layle, don't do that! Please, please, anything but that, please, no—!"

Layle took no heed of him. Leaning over with the glass, he carefully cut the straps, freeing Elsdon from his bonds. Elsdon sobbed uncontrollably. He could do nothing but lie limply as Layle sat down on the bed and pulled him into his arms.

Layle's own body was limp; his arms lay loosely around Elsdon. "Yes," he said, as though in response to Elsdon's cries of protest. "A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners. Yes, yes, yes."

He continued to chant the words, as though they were a prayer to his gods, while Elsdon sobbed into his shoulder. The High Seeker's eyes were now fixed, not on his love-mate, but on the black volume upon the night-table. His arms remained slack around Elsdon.

After a while, the chant ended.

o—o—o

The Eternal Dungeon remained still. Weldon's footsteps were the only sound as he walked down the corridor leading from the outer dungeon to the inner dungeon. The furnaces along this corridor, normally tended day and night, had been allowed to die down on this one evening. This evening that would decide the future of the Eternal Dungeon.

Weldon could not bring himself to look straight at Layle Smith's night guards until he reached them. He had already passed the High Seeker's day guards, blocking the entrance to the High Seeker's cell from the outer dungeon, and what he had seen in their expressions had been enough to drive away from him all thoughts of remaining at his documentwork for a few hours more.

Now, as he came to a halt and raised his eyes, he saw that the junior night guard was so white in the face that he looked ready to keel over. Mr.

Sobel's eyes remained quiet, but his muscles were rigid. He looked at Weldon without speaking.

"How has it been?" Weldon forced himself to ask.

"Silent, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice was as rigid as his body. "We haven't heard anything for several hours."

Weldon felt his own body go taut. "And what did you hear before?"

Mr. Sobel told him, and by the time he was through, Weldon could feel sweat tickling his torso. The junior guard, Mr. Urman, barely waited for Mr. Sobel to finish before saying rapidly, "I thought we should enter when we heard that. But Mr. Sobel said we mustn't—"

"Quite right." Stripped of all other strength, Weldon sought to maintain authority in his voice. "You were both under orders. Anything that has taken place inside is my responsibility." He looked toward the door, imagined opening it, and his remaining courage fled.

He looked over at Mr. Sobel. The guard's eyes flicked away from the latch, which he had been eyeing. Weldon cleared his throat and said, "Will you accompany me, Mr. Sobel?"

"Certainly, sir." Relief, rather than apprehension, coated the senior guard's voice. Weldon could guess that, for a man of Mr. Sobel's training, standing by waiting was more painful than witnessing the worst. The guard turned and lifted the latch.

Weldon was several steps inside the cell before he realized that it was quite possible that Mr. Sobel's strength alone would not be enough. Weldon halted within the sitting room, indecisive. The door to the bedroom was closed, but for a small gap. No sound emerged from the room; it was as silent as death. Perhaps its inhabitants were merely sleeping.

He felt a touch upon his arm after another minute and realized that the senior guard was awaiting him. With his eyes fixed upon the door to the silent room, Weldon murmured, "I was just realizing that I feel no envy whatsoever for Elsdon Taylor."

Mr. Sobel said nothing. When Weldon turned his eyes toward the guard he saw that Mr. Sobel's dagger was in his hand; his other hand lay upon the coiled whip at his hip. It seemed the most natural gesture in the world to Weldon at that moment. He looked back at the door and drew a deep breath. If the inhabitant of the bedroom – the *inhabitants*, he told himself furiously – had heard his voice, he and Mr. Sobel no longer had the advantage of surprise. They must move swiftly.

He walked forward rapidly, with Mr. Sobel far enough apart from him to be able to wield his whip if it should become necessary. With one thrust, Weldon opened the bedroom door. Then he paused at the entrance. His breath hissed out slowly.

Through the doorway he could see the two-person bed at the far end of the bedroom; on it sat Elsdon. He was stripped for bed, and he was cradling Layle, who had his head buried upon Elsdon's shoulder. Weldon could see the bloodline beating lightly in Layle's neck.

Weldon heard Mr. Sobel draw out a long breath; the guard's dagger whispered as it stole back into its sheath. Weldon felt his muscles relax.

Then his breath caught. Elsdon had raised his head, and his eyes were those of a prisoner who has endured a long racking.

Elsdon whispered, "He is gone."

As he spoke, Layle shifted in his arms, slipping out of Elsdon's grasp. He flopped down, his limbs sprawling asunder as he fell. He landed with a shudder, then lay still, his eyes staring blankly toward the ceiling.

o—o—o
o—o—o

. . . Much as modern historians would like to turn their heads in shame from this period, it is in the tale of Layle Smith's mental illness that we must seek the most shining example of this quality. I refer, of course, to the Seekers' willingness to suffer for their prisoners.

In the archives of the Eternal Dungeon lie two lists, bound as books. The first list consists of the names of Seekers who were permanently suspended from their work due to disability or death from natural or

accidental causes. The list is quite long, as might be expected from an era when medicine was primitive.

The second list is similar to the first, but the disabilities and deaths of this second group of Seekers were not natural or accidental; rather, they were directly caused by duties undertaken by the Seekers. This second list is twice as long as the first.

On the twelfth month of the year 356, the Eternal Dungeon's Record-keeper added to the second list the name of Layle Smith. We may never know what duties Layle Smith undertook as a Seeker that led to the breaking of his mind. But perhaps a clue lies in the oft-quoted and mysterious statement made afterwards by the Seeker Weldon Chapman: "Layle Smith had a choice whether to go mad, and he chose as a Seeker."

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Rebirth **6**
TOPS AND SOPS

The year 356, the sixth month.

Over the past few decades, historians have gradually become aware of the danger of treating as solid fact any statement produced by an elite group of writers. A typical example of this problem arises in research done on the Thousand Years' War between Yclau and Vovim. Most of the writings that have survived come from soldiers of Yclau, who paint a picture of the Yclau people acting with charity and graciousness toward the prisoners they took during that war. There seems little doubt that the Yclau soldiers who expressed this sentiment were sincere in their belief that they showed compassion toward a vicious and ungrateful enemy.

Yet because of the length of the war and the consequent volume of material surviving from it, a few narratives by the primarily illiterate Vovimian soldiers have survived, and these soldiers paint a very different picture, speaking of the abuse they underwent at Yclau hands.

Some historians, citing such examples, claim that elite writings should never be trusted, and that when only the elite provide accounts of what happened, the truth will be forever lost to history. This seems a simplification of a more complex historical rule, which is that all writers, both elite and commoner, provide accounts written from their own narrow perspective, so that the truth must be pieced together patiently by the historian, who in turn must be aware of his own biases.

One of the great regrets of every historian studying the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon is that no "commoner" accounts have survived from that period. Every surviving writing from that time comes from the "elite," the men and women who ran the dungeon, including former prisoners who joined the elite. In no case do we have accounts from the commoners, the prisoners who were not offered the opportunity to help run the dungeon. Most of the Eternal Dungeon's prisoners were executed, while the few that were found innocent of their crimes and released into the "lighted world" were evidently so shaken by their experiences in the dungeon that they did not commit their memories to paper.

This being the case, historians must treat with skepticism the idealistic words recorded by long-term residents of the Eternal Dungeon, such as the Seekers. It seems likely that many of the prisoners had a very different perspective on how those ideals were put into practice.

It is sobering for historians to realize how many tales by prisoners will never be known. For example, a ledger has survived from the period of Layle Smith's High Seekership which contains a list that continues for many pages. The list consists of thousands of names . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

There's only one thing I despise more than sops, and that's tops.

Sops are bad enough. I've had to work with too many of them; they go around talking about flowers and beautiful light and how nice the world would be if everybody was kind to each other. Meanwhile, I'm lugging a fifty-pound barrow of rocks and thinking to myself that the world would be better off if midwives examined every baby at birth and killed the ones who are sops. After all, we swat annoying flies.

Tops are worse, there's no doubt of that. While the sops are singing on about joy and love, the top is screaming in your ear that you'd better move your bloody bum faster or he'll smash your face in. He means it too. I think I was about eight when I realized that the world is one giant prison with us bottoms as the prisoners, and the tops as our guards and torturers. Seemed obvious to me that the only thing to do was for the bottoms to make a well-planned attack on the tops and tumble their bodies into the midden where they deserve to lie. By the time I was twenty, though, I'd given up on convincing anyone else of this obvious fact, and there's no point in trying to run a revolution on your own. That only gets you into trouble.

It's a pity I didn't remember that on the night I put a dagger into Mendel's chest.

Mendel was one of the "guards," by which I mean that he was a bloke who could have lived his life as a bottom, but instead chose to help the tops keep the rest of us imprisoned. A bloodsucking leech, in other words, and this one sure sucked the blood out of all of us at the quarry. I could put up with it where I was concerned – I've put up with a lot in my day – but when he beat bloody some poor boy who stumbled and dropped his load, that was too much. If there's one conviction I hold in life – aye, I do have a conviction, despite popular belief – it's that you have to look out for your mates. That's what gets me about the tops: they don't care about people, just about getting business done. I expect that Mendel would have sold his best mate if he'd thought the profits would help the quarry.

At any rate, I explain all this so that you can understand why, on the night they brought me to the Eternal Dungeon, I wasn't exactly filled with joy

when I caught sight of two hooded men leaning over a table, in soft conversation with each other.

I knew what they were, of course. Every child in our queendom is brought up on stories of the faceless Seekers, the head tops of the Eternal Dungeon. Torturers of highest skill, they're said to be, who will crush a prisoner to dust and then trample on the dust while cheerfully singing.

Mothers will say anything to get their kids to shut up. I'd taken the trouble to ascertain the truth about the Seekers myself, during the three weeks I'd been at Alleyway Prison. There was a guard there who'd worked at the Eternal Dungeon in some exalted position like latrine scraper, and he'd heard information he shouldn't have heard, which he was quite eager to share with any prisoner who showed an interest. Not only a top, but a top who was a sop – bloody blades, I seem to spend my life surrounded by such people.

Anyway, what he'd told me was encouraging, but I wasn't prepared to discount the scare-tales of my childhood. If nothing else, I could see before me a ceiling-high slate tablet covered with prisoners' names, and a goodly number of those names were crossed out. I knew what that meant.

The first Seeker who looked up from the conversation – it's hard to tell these hooded men apart, but this one had green eyes – looked at me in such a glacial manner that I was prepared for a moment to believe every story I'd ever heard about the Eternal Dungeon, including the one about how Seekers hold parties when they're racking prisoners.

Then the second Seeker looked up, and my doubts vanished. I don't know why. There wasn't much to see within the hood's eye-holes – just an ordinary pair of blue eyes, looking at me steadily. I had a puppy once who used to look at me that way. It wasn't so much the Seeker's eyes as the way he held himself that alerted me to the fact that this was a different sort of man than the green-eyed Seeker. There was a certain reserve, a bit of hesitancy – it's hard to describe, but I've met enough tops to know which ones can be pushed and which can't. This was a top who could be pushed.

All the while I was thinking this, a conversation was going on between my guards and a little bald man sitting at the desk that the Seekers were standing next to. I didn't pay him any mind; I could tell at a glance that he

was another of those bottoms who had become a bloodsucker. After a while, the bald man turned his head and said something to the green-eyed Seeker, who didn't reply. He simply shifted his gaze toward the other Seeker.

There was a moment's pause as the second Seeker flicked a glance my way. Then he said to the green-eyed Seeker, "Certainly, sir. I'd be glad to take care of this prisoner."

Sweet blood, they were making babies into Seekers. I might not have been able to see the youth's face, but there was no mistaking the nature of his voice: he must have been a good twenty years younger than me. This was going to be the easiest escape in the history of the Eternal Dungeon. Stranger though I am to soppish sentiments, I felt a momentary sensation of floating.

Then they put a hood over my head. I'm not sure who "they" were; it wasn't my original guards, who would have known better. Naturally, I let out a yell that must have deafened anyone standing too close, and I butted my head into the stomach of the man who'd put the hood on me. Aimed well, too; I heard his grunt of pain. I tried kicking to see whether that would do any good. My arms were useless, since they'd been bound, but I figured that, if the hangman was anywhere near, I had a good chance at crippling his legs and delaying the execution.

I got a whiplash across the back for my troubles; that told me that at least some of the stories about the Eternal Dungeon were true. It took my breath away for a minute. While I was recovering, I heard a voice say, "Please calm yourself, sir. No one is trying to harm you; we are simply preparing you for your journey to your cell. The hood will be removed once you're there."

It was the youth, of course; nobody else in that room would have made such a pretty speech to a fractious prisoner. For a moment I was filled only with sourness of spirit. Courteous tops affect me that way – they'll say "please" and "thank you" and then bring a staff down on your head if you're working too slow. I prefer a top like Mendel who doesn't hide his cruelty behind laces and bows.

Still, it didn't take me long to realize that this could be an advantage to me. After all, my plan required that I have a Seeker who was willing to listen to me, and this one evidently was the listening sort. I let the dungeon guards take hold of me – I could identify the one whose stomach I'd butted, because his grip on me was unnecessarily tight – and then I was marched out of the room.

I didn't hear my original guards say anything friendly like, "Good luck." They were probably hoping I'd be put on the rack my first day.

Well, the dungeon guards put me in a big, bare cell whose only concession to comfort was the chamber-pot in the corner. I've lived in worse. At least this place seemed tightly enough sealed that the rats wouldn't run over me at night. The cell was well lit and warm too; I had no complaints. Not that it would have made any difference if I had.

After the guards left – once they'd removed my bonds and hood, I'd seen there were two of them – I took a few minutes to ascertain that the only way out of the cell was through the door by which I'd entered. I didn't much care for the idea of exiting in that manner. I could guess that the guards were waiting outside, and I'd had a look at the guard whose stomach I'd butted; he was a big, burly, unsmiling man. I guessed that I was lucky to have gotten away with no more than a single lash.

No, my best hope for escape lay with the youth who had foolishly taken me on as a challenge. I lay down on the bed-shelf (it even had a pillow and mattress and blankets; the guards at Alleyway Prison would have called this place soft) and awaited my rescuer.

When he came, he entered the cell so unobtrusively that I didn't even notice that the door had opened and closed. He didn't throw anything at me or shout, simply waited for me to take notice of him. Then he said, "Good evening, Mr. Little. I'm Mr. Taylor, your Seeker. I trust that your back is feeling well?"

He spoke in a cool voice; I guessed that he was trying to imitate someone, probably another Seeker he admired. I decided it was time to see how far this youngling could be pushed. I continued to lie where I was, propped up on one elbow, and grinned at him, saying, "My back's fine. My boots need cleaning, though. Good thing you're here."

He stiffened, which told me a lot. A sheltered youth, probably brought up by some namby-pamby top who shielded him from the harsh realities of the world. If the youth's father beat his bottoms, he wouldn't tell the youth, so the youth lived with the illusion that the world was soft and sweet. A sop, in other words. Well, it hardly needed that to make me despise this Seeker.

"Mr. Little," he said, in that same cool manner that told me he was continuing to imitate whichever Seeker he hero-worshipped, "I'm sorry that I failed to make clear to you the rules under which I will be conducting your searching. One of these rules is that you and I must treat each other with mutual courtesy: you must stand in my presence and address me as Mr. Taylor or sir . . ."

I'd heard enough. I could guess just how far the "mutual" part of that courtesy went; I'd be expected to grovel and fawn, while the youth would act the part of the top. "Oh, lick my boots," I growled. "Or better yet, go lick the boots of that green-eyed Seeker."

He stiffened again. I seemed to be doing well with my assaults today. I wondered whether anyone else knew that he worshipped the green-eyed Seeker, or whether I'd just uncovered his utmost secret.

I waited for him to reply with more flowery speeches, but he didn't say anything. Instead he went to the door, knocked on it, and spoke briefly to one of the guards there. A moment later, both guards entered the cell. The burly one was taking the whip from his belt and unwinding it.

I didn't like the looks of this. I took a sharp glance at the door, but the second guard had locked it behind him, and I guessed that I wouldn't be able to wrest the key from either of the guards. I already knew, from the fact that the youth had knocked at the door, that he possessed no key. A wise precaution, that – I could have stolen the key from this baby in the space of a single water-drop. But that left me with no option but to strip myself of my shirt, as the youth quietly instructed me to do.

I'll spare you the details of what followed. The youth described it as "twenty medium lashes" – I don't know about the "medium" part, but it was certainly twenty lashes. It was hardly the worst beating I've had in my time, even though the burly guard put all his pleasure into it, so much so

that the youth interrupted at one point to caution the guard to go lighter. There are advantages to having a sop as your Seeker.

By the end, though, I'd concluded that this one wasn't quite as much of a sop as I'd thought. Mind you, he followed up the beating by giving me a little speech about "this regretful incident" and "trust it won't be necessary again," and all the polite sentiments put forward by tops who are vaguely aware they're vile monsters. But he didn't say that he was sorry or look in the least bit disconcerted by the yells of agony I took care to emit. I concluded that he'd had a little more experience than I'd thought. Maybe he'd seen his father's bottoms being beaten after all.

Thankfully, he kept his speech short; I've met tops who will force you to stand for an hour or more after they've taken their belt to you. This one left the cell after a few minutes, saying that he'd visit again the next day. The guards followed after him, though the burly one paused at the door to gloat at my wounds. He did it silently; I'd guessed already that the Seekers had their guards well controlled.

No doubt they wanted to reserve the fun of torture for themselves.

o—o—o

By the time my Seeker arrived the next day, I was ready for him. Having learned how far I could push the youth – by the nasty experience of having pushed him too far – I was eager to put my plan into action. So I retreated a bit. I didn't act like I'd repented, which would have ruined my scheme, but I acted as though I had been cowed into cooperating at least a bit.

He bought it, of course. I got to listen to him give another flowery speech about my rights as a prisoner – I didn't pay much attention to it, except for the part about how the guards could only punish me upon his orders. Then we got down to serious business.

I'll say this for the youth: he was well trained. He didn't make any attempt to ask me questions about the murder. Instead he asked me a lot of nosy questions about my childhood and my mates and my work. Since it didn't seem to matter what I said – I think he would have been happy if I'd recited the names of the border rivers – I kept myself from falling asleep with boredom by telling him what conditions were like at the quarry. I

needed to do this anyway, of course, to establish the number of people who had motives to kill Mendel, and I was especially careful to invent motives for Deems, a foul worm who claimed to be a bottom but was always running to the tops to tell them of mistakes the rest of us had made.

Slandering Deems was pleasureful fun, of course, but I was surprised at how much enjoyment I received from reciting the ill deeds of Mendel and describing the results of that stink-pile's maliciousness upon our work conditions. Even when I killed him, I hadn't known I hated him that much.

When I was through, the youth said, "It sounds as though Mendel was a vicious man."

I waited, but he said nothing more. No "But he was probably a good man at heart." No "Even the evil deserve to live." No "It doesn't matter how badly he treated you; he deserved your respect." I was beginning to find this youth a bit disconcerting.

I decided to take a detour from the path I'd been forging. "Some of my mates were saying that, in a just world, Mendel's murderer would be rewarded for getting rid of such loathsomeness."

His reply was quiet. "The wicked receive praise while the innocent suffer. That's the way of the world."

I stared at him for a moment, but there was no mistaking the sincerity in his voice. I was obviously going to have to reassess the unworldliness of this youth.

"So you agree with my mates that Mendel should have been murdered?" I said.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "that your friends are looking at the matter from the wrong side round. The question isn't whether the evil men of this world should receive punishment. The question is what happens to the hearts of men who decide to inflict such punishment on their own, in time of anger. It's quite possible, you know, to become as evil as the wickedness you're punishing."

I should have expected such twisted logic from a top; they can make the beating of a small child sound sensible. I shrugged and said, "Maybe. I'll

have to think about that."

I gave it two more days. I figured that was long enough to pretend that I'd been eaten away with guilt by the youth's words. On the second day, when I heard him opening the cell door, I began emitting groans and wrapped myself into a ball. I didn't dare try crying; I wasn't that good at this game.

"I did it," I said when he'd made the proper enquiries. "I persuaded Deems to kill Mendel. I thought at the time I was doing the right thing, but . . . Oh, Mr. Taylor, you were right. Everything that was evil in Mendel I've become."

The youth didn't reply immediately. That bloody hood of his made it difficult for me to tell how my confession was going over with him; he just looked at me steadily with those puppy eyes. Then he said, "I'm glad most prisoners aren't as good at acting as you are."

I didn't do anything stupid like suck in my breath. I looked at him in a vague manner, as though not taking in what he was saying.

He sighed and gestured for me to rise. I decided not to take the chance that he'd call the guards back in. Unwinding myself from a ball, I stood against the wall, hunching myself as though from shame.

He sighed again and said, "You've been instructed by someone. A former worker of the Eternal Dungeon, or a prisoner who was allowed to go free. Your instructor told you that you should confess to a crime – preferably a lesser crime than you'd actually committed – and that you should express repentance. He said that, if you did this, your Seeker would do all he could to get any death sentence you might be given commuted to eternal confinement within the dungeon. Your instructor further told you that this 'confinement' would simply mean that you could not leave the Eternal Dungeon. You would be permitted to work here at any job you were suited for, in the same manner as though you lived in the lighted world."

Well, the youth was no fool; I'd already guessed that. That didn't make it any more pleasant for me to learn how intelligent he was. I tried again. "Is that true?" I said, letting my face transform into hope. "Is it possible I can receive mercy for my terrible crime?"

I must have gone a bit over the peak, for something in the youth's eyes ceased to look like the puppy I'd owned and began to look more like the vicious hound next door, who tore my leg to pieces when I was ten. He turned and went to the cell door.

I sighed and began peeling off my shirt. When the youth returned with the guards, his voice was cool, which I found even more disconcerting than the change in his eyes. I didn't think the coolness was due to imitation this time.

"You're a good actor," he said. "Unfortunately, your timing was off. I've been broken; I know that transformation of character doesn't occur that quickly. Would that it did."

Then his voice went as glacial as the green-eyed Seeker's look. "Sixty hard lashes," he said. "And the next time this happens, I'll put you on the rack. Do you understand me, Mr. Little?"

I understood him all right. He was a man like Mendel, posing as a sop. Those are the most dangerous sort.

CHAPTER TWO

If you're expecting me to describe what the youth said after my punishment, that's a sign you've never received a hard beating. I was barely conscious when the burly guard finished his work, and it was two weeks before I was able to do more than lie on my stomach and moan.

I had a couple of visitors during that time. One was a man claiming to be the prison's healer; if he was, he didn't know his work, because I got better during the time he treated me. He would have been dismissed as an incompetent at Alleyway Prison, where the healer might as well have held the title of head torturer.

Of course the other visitor was the youth. He didn't make any flowery speeches this time about regretful incidents; I guessed he knew that his illusion of soppishness had been penetrated. He spent a lot of time examining my wounds. I wondered whether he was the type of top who gets off on the sight of blood, and I had visions of what that could lead to. He must have been too busy hero-worshipping the green-eyed Seeker, though, because the youth made no attempts at what remained of my virtue – or perhaps I just wasn't his type. He certainly wasn't mine.

I spent the first few days imagining putting my old dagger into his chest, but that sort of dreaming gets wearisome after a while. Instead, I tried to assess my situation. The only plan I'd held for escaping from this place hadn't worked, and I'd received evidence enough that the scare-tales about the Eternal Dungeon were true. Mind you, the youth had implied that the soppish guard's tales were true also, but who knew whether to believe the youth's words. It was quite possible that every word he'd spoken to me was a lie.

So I watched him, and tried to judge from the tone of his voice how soon he'd stretch me on the rack, and felt myself grow more and more chill as I realized what I was facing. I didn't think of suicide – if I wanted to die, all I need do was confess to my crime – but I came to understand, as I never had before, some of the reasons why bottoms kill themselves rather than tops.

I spent a lot of time wishing I had access to silver pot-herb. I told you about those sops who go on and on about joy and beautiful light; well, I'd

never believed any bottom who claimed this had happened to him. A mild glow when I was with my mates, exchanging stories about the horrors of the tops, was the most pleasure I'd ever received by natural means. My theory was that the sops had been ingesting silver pot-herb, because, as everyone knows, silver can give you that feeling of floating on air and being surrounded by piercingly beautiful images. I'd only taken it a few times in my life, because it has the nasty side-effect of removing inhibitions. I'd been on silver the night I killed Mendel. Not that I regretted killing him, but if I'd been sober I would have taken greater care to keep from being seen when I left his area of the Parkside district. Now, faced with a Seeker who planned to torture me till I confessed to the real reason I'd been walking around a top district that night, I wished I had some more silver to put me into a haze that would dull at least a bit of the pain. I was beginning to have sweating spells every time the youth entered my cell.

Then he brought me a xylophone.

It was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen, all etched with gold in the manner of top instruments. And it wasn't just lovely to the eye: its staves were silver-toned, the notes keyed just right and given the ability to echo each other. I'd heard of xylophones like that but of course had never had my hands on one.

The youth brought this treasure into my cell and placed it at the head of my bed-shelf, where I was still lying on my stomach. "Your school records said that you used to play this," he said. "I thought it would help you to pass the time." And then he left, not waiting for me to respond.

I spent an hour after that, staring at the thing, trying to figure out what form of torture this was. The best I could figure was that the youth would wait till I was attached to the jewel and then take it away from me. Well, if that was his plan, it wouldn't work. I'd never let myself get attached to anything but my mates, knowing as I did that the tops were likely to get rid of my belongings at any time. They got rid of my mates too, but I wasn't prepared to stop caring about my mates for that reason. If I did, I'd end up like one of those business-obsessed tops.

The xylophone stayed, and after that the youth's visits changed; he went back to asking about my childhood and my mates and my work. I'd reached the point where I could stand again, and I would watch him from a corner, trying to make sense of him. I'd met worldly, hard men. I'd also met unworldly, soft sops. But believe me or not as you will, this youth was both. I'm not making mock. He was as sincere about giving out xylophones as he was about giving out whiplashes. I didn't know what to make of him.

I suppose it was the xylophone that caused me to take a chance. We'd reached the second month now of my imprisonment, and we weren't getting anywhere; he was still asking me questions about the hell-pit where I'd worked, and I was still refusing to volunteer information about the night of Mendel's murder. The youth didn't look as though he was in any hurry to put me on the rack, though I was dead certain he'd yank me into the rack room if I told him the slightest lie. It appeared that his preferred method of breaking prisoners was to stay them out, waiting for the moment when the delay became too much for the prisoners and they began to babble.

Well, he could wait till he reached retirement age if that was his plan. I wasn't anywhere near to being broken, but I was certainly getting bored. The youth was spending most of each night with me – he kept strange hours – and we were beginning to cover the same ground over and over. In the remainder of my waking hours I'd play with the little xylophone and dream of the days when my mates and I used to make music together. There are certain songs that bottoms sing . . . Well, tops will never understand the appeal of those songs.

So I decided to break the stalemate finally. I told the youth, "I can ask you questions, can't I? You said I had that right when I first arrived."

"Certainly," he said. If he'd become bored by my endless tales of life in the quarry, he wasn't showing any sign of it. He reminded me of a mate I had who could listen to the same joke twenty times and roar with laughter each time.

"So where did you go to school? Was it in the Parkside district?"

Of course it was. He answered my questions readily. As I'd guessed, he'd lived a spoiled childhood; his father owned a fleece-dying business, with

hundreds of workers. The youth didn't seem to want to talk about his family much – he was hiding some sort of secret – but he talked easily about his school and the mate-bonds he'd made there. That surprised me, I'll admit. I'd known in theory that tops have mates, but since the tops' minds are on business most of the time, they don't talk much about their mates. This youth talked quite a lot about his mates, saying he missed them; I gathered his work kept him too busy to go back and visit them. Well, that was more like what I'd expect from a top, but he sure had a lot to say about the boys he'd spent time with and the games they'd played. It made me wonder whether the green-eyed Seeker had paid him any mind, or whether the youth was spending his days lonely now. It would sure explain why he spent so much time talking to me.

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Looking back on this, I can see that the youth's candidness was all just his devious way of trying to break me, but I didn't recognize it at the time; he was good at his work. There came the day – he must have been waiting for this day like a spider waits for its victim – when I took a deep breath and said, "I have another question."

He nodded silently. We were standing in our usual spots, me at the far end of the cell and him near the door. I hadn't liked to come too close to him since that incident with the hard beating. Sop he might be, but he'd given the orders for my lashing in a no-nonsense manner, and I still wondered how long it would be before he made use of the rack.

I took another deep breath and said, "It's about a mate of mine who got arrested a few years back. He was searched at a local prison – we heard about it later from one of his fellow prisoners. It seems my mate tried at first to lie to the men questioning him. That didn't work; they saw through him. But he knew that if he confessed to the deed, he'd be sent straight off to the hangman – unless maybe he said he was sorry, which he wasn't. A bunch of us at the quarry had a debate about what he should have done. It didn't occur to us to ask anyone who'd worked at a prison. What do *you* think my mate should have done?"

It took him a while to answer, and I can tell you, the sweat was pouring down my back during the delay. Waiting for the hangman is easy by

comparison to waiting for your torturer to decide whether to fit you for the rack strappings.

Finally he said, "My advice to your friend would have been that he should be honest about his dilemma to the men who were questioning him – that would have been a start. Would you like to sit down, Mr. Little?"

I narrowed my eyes, trying to read his face; that bloody hood still made it difficult for me to tell what he was thinking. "I thought you had a rule against that."

"Not if you permit me to sit down as well." And he seated himself on my bed-shelf, cool as can be.

It was a relief, I'll admit. I suppose they make prisoners in the Eternal Dungeon stand for eight-hour stretches in the hopes of breaking them that way. I'd done sixteen-hour shifts since I was a youth, so that tactic didn't work on me. Still, sitting down made the conversation a little less stiff. The first thing the youth said that was important – he tended to rattle on about stuff that didn't matter – was, "Death isn't the worst thing, you know."

Easy for a top to say. I bet he'd never seen a mate die a violent death. But I lost that bet in the next moment when he said, "A friend of mine died when we were at school together. Up till that time, he'd lived a wasted life: he hadn't put any effort into schoolwork or into any side interests, and it looked as though he was going to spend the rest of his life in idle and useless pursuits. Then one day he saw a little girl in the street who was on the point of being trampled by a passing horse, and he charged in and saved the girl's life. He was trampled himself. This happened just outside the schoolyard, and a group of us came running and knelt beside him while the healer was being fetched. My friend didn't live long enough to be treated by the healer, but I remember what he said when he was dying. He said, 'This is like having a child of my own loins. Even after I die, my good deed will remain alive so that others can remember me.'"

Pretty fancy speech for a dying boy. I wondered whether the youth had made this tale up. It was all well and good for him to talk about men being remembered for their good deeds – he was a top. I don't suppose he noticed, when he was in school, that the history books spoke about nothing

except the deeds of tops. But I'd noticed; I knew that, when I died, nothing I'd done would be remembered. I wasn't in any hurry to throw myself under the hooves of horses or let myself be led off to the hangman.

It was a clever ploy by him, though. He knew my weakness for stories about mate-bonds; he was prepared to use that as a weapon to break me. I didn't see anything I could do about that except try to be on the alert for his next trap.

Traps tend to be well hidden in the Eternal Dungeon. The youth had just finished telling the tale about his heroic mate when there was a knock on the cell door, and a guard entered – not one of my guards, but a strange one.

"The High Seeker sends his apologies for interrupting you, sir," the guard said to the youth. "He was wondering whether you could join him in his office when you were at a pausing point."

The youth offered his thanks for the message – I'd never met a top so infested with politeness – then turned to me and said, "Would you mind if we took a break? I'll be back as soon as I can."

As though a prisoner ever minds having a break from his torturer. Sometimes I wondered whether the youth really knew what he was doing, or whether he was living with the illusion that he and I were taking part in a pleasant get-together.

He was gone for a while after that, and I played with the xylophone and thought about the youth's dead mate. It must be nice to be a top and have people talking about you after you're dead. Mind you, I was sure that my own mates – who must think I was dead by now – were still talking about me, but that was as far as the matter would go. When they took me off to the hangman, nobody would put up plaques in the Eternal Dungeon saying, "A good man dwelt in this place." No top would remember that I'd lived.

The door finally opened again. The youth re-entered, and behind him followed the green-eyed Seeker.

I knew who the green-eyed Seeker was by now, of course, and this wasn't a pleasant turn of events. Even that soppish guard at Alleyway Prison had

believed every scare-tale told about this man. I suppose my apprehension must have showed on my face, because the green-eyed Seeker said, in a surprisingly soft voice, "Forgive me for interrupting your time with Mr. Taylor, sir. I was wondering whether I might have your permission to stay in the corner here and do some work."

He was holding in his right hand a thin board with pieces of paper pinned to it; his left hand held a pen and a sealed inkwell. I gazed narrow-eyed at him, trying to figure out whether this was an elaborate prank, but he didn't say anything. So after a while I shrugged and said, "It's your dungeon."

"Thank you, Mr. Little." And with that, the green-eyed Seeker sat down cross-legged in the corner and began to scribble on the paper, for all the world as though he were a lowly record-keeper.

I tell you, that was the moment at which I began to wonder whether the burly guard had actually bashed me over the head upon our first meeting, and everything since then had been a weird dream. Either that, or I was in the hands of a bunch of madmen. I didn't much care for the thought of that: something about the way the green-eyed Seeker spoke made me think of racks. A madman who is in charge of a rack . . .

"Don't worry," said the youth quietly. "When he gets absorbed in documentwork, he's oblivious to everything occurring around him. He won't listen in on our conversation, provided that we keep our voices low."

As though it mattered to me which tops listened to us talking. I'd already figured that the guards were listening from behind the door, waiting for the inevitable moment when they'd be called upon to secretly record my confession. I shrugged, and the youth went back to talking about the glories of death.

The next few days were just the same. Every day now, the green-eyed Seeker accompanied the youth to the cell, apologized for his intrusion, and sat cross-legged in the corner, spending eight hours doing documentwork. Of course everyone knows that even the highest tops have documentwork to do, but this began to feel a bit creepy to me. Surely a man of his sort had more important things to do with his time?

My curiosity got the better of me finally, and I asked the youth. He glanced back at the green-eyed Seeker to see whether he was still absorbed with his writing, then said, "The High Seeker and I are working together these days. There's a rule in our code-book, though, that says a Seeker may not participate in the searching of a prisoner unless he's there for the start of the search. The High Seeker doesn't want to waste the three months you and I have had together by making us go back to the start, so he's waiting for your case to be finished before he and I take up our work."

It still sounded odd to me. Why should the green-eyed Seeker do his waiting here rather than somewhere else? Because it was becoming obvious that the top didn't like this place as a workshop. Every now and then his eyes would glaze over, as though he'd taken silver pot-herb, and when he finally shook himself out of this dreaming spell, he'd look angry, as though he hadn't intended for it to happen, and he'd scribble furiously on the paper. These glaze-eyed spells were beginning to grow longer and longer, and his fury was correspondingly increasing. I didn't like the looks of all this. I'd known one top who went completely off his head and started throwing rocks at the quarry workers. If a man like this went off his head, I could just imagine what he'd do.

Of course, when I was alone I'd tell myself that I was being silly. The green-eyed Seeker was simply as bored as I was with the cell and was impatient for me to confess my deed so that he could get on with his racking. When I said something like this to the youth, he agreed with me, saying, "Searching prisoners means a lot to the High Seeker. I was with him during a period recently when he was on leave from searching, and it was nerve-racking for him, having to confine his duties to documentwork. He managed to get through that period all right, but this time round . . ."

My interest pricked up. There haven't been many times over the years when I've empathized with tops, but this was something I was familiar with. There'd been a year after school when I was unable to find work, and that had been the worst time of my life. Having my fiancée break off with me hadn't helped either. I said, taking a stab, "He's got personal problems? That's adding to the pressure?"

The youth's gaze had drifted past me to the green-eyed Seeker, who was having one of his glaze-eyed spells. Usually the youth was totally centered

upon whatever conversation he and I were holding, but occasionally, since the green-eyed Seeker's arrival at my cell, I'd sensed that the youth's mind wasn't entirely on me. Now he said, rather stiffly, "We shouldn't be talking about the High Seeker. We were discussing your friend's problem."

I shrugged. If he didn't want to talk about the green-eyed Seeker, that was fine with me. Truth to tell, that made me admire him a bit. I'd never known a top who was above back-slashing gossip that would cripple a man.

But I'd already guessed that this top was different from the others.

CHAPTER THREE

So things went on after that in the same manner. My mind wasn't much on our conversation these days; I had my eye on the top in the corner, wondering whether the youth would be able to control him if he started becoming violent. But it did occur me to ask the youth about some of the things the soppish guard had told me about life in the Eternal Dungeon. "He said that the Seekers aren't content with breaking a man's body and making him confess to his crime. They want to break the prisoner's mind as well, making him say he was wrong to have committed the crime."

The youth shook his head. He was sitting on the end of the bed-shelf closest to the door, with his back to the green-eyed Seeker, who was having one of his moments of furious scribbling. "I might have made that mistake at one time. I've come to believe, though, that it's wrong to tamper with men's consciences. Some prisoners truly do need the help of the Seekers to recognize their guilt, but there will always be a few prisoners who are so convinced of the righteousness of their deeds that you'd have to change them into a different type of man before you could convince them of their guilt. I don't feel qualified to transform a prisoner's character to that extent. In cases like that, all I'll aim for is a confession of the crime."

Well, this was news to me. He might have told me that from the start and saved me weeks' worth of nightmares of me being on the rack, screaming, "I was wrong to kill Mendel! I'm a terrible man for having done it!" The image of the screams had bothered me more than the image of the rack. I hated the idea of becoming one of those boot-licking bottoms who agrees with every bit of nonsense that the tops throw our way.

I was thinking about this, and thinking that I was lucky not to be in the hands of any other Seeker, when there was a knock on the door. The burly guard stuck his head through the door, saying, "Mr. Chapman would like to speak with you, sir. Shall I show him in?"

"No, I'll speak with him outside." The youth gave me one of his tedious apologies and stood up, walking toward the door.

The green-eyed Seeker had been scribbling all this time, oblivious even to the guard's interruption, but when he saw the youth open the door and

begin to walk through it, he shot to his feet as though he were a child being abandoned by its mother. "Mr. Taylor?" he said.

I swear, there was panic in his voice. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't been there.

"It's all right," said the youth in the tone of a mother comforting her child. "I'll be just outside." And he left, closing the door behind him.

The green-eyed Seeker continued to stare at the door, as though expecting the youth to leap back into the cell. His board of papers had fallen from his hand when he jumped up, and now his hands were tightened into fists. He was beginning to shake.

This was bad; this was very bad. It was clear that the green-eyed Seeker was aware of his own unsteadiness and believed that he'd lose all control if he wasn't in the same room as the youth. And if he lost control, there was only one person in the cell who was available to be the target of his fury.

I decided it was time for a little force on my own part. Trying to keep as far away from the green-eyed Seeker as I could, I went up to the cell door and hammered on it. The burly guard opened the door. Beyond him, I could see the youth talking to another Seeker, no doubt discussing some trivial business matter.

"Look," I said in a loud voice to the youth, "can't you talk with this bloke when you're finished with me? I'm not going to wait around forever for you to get back to work with me."

I don't know what the youth thought I was going to do as an alternative to waiting for him – start a xylophone band with the green-eyed Seeker, perhaps – but he said promptly, "Of course, Mr. Little. Mr. Chapman, would it be possible for us to discuss this later?"

The other Seeker murmured something in assent, and the youth returned to the cell. By the time he got back, the green-eyed Seeker had recovered enough that he was sitting cross-legged again, writing on his paper, but I could see that he was still shaking. The youth looked over at him, then knelt down beside him and put his hand on the other top's hand. He murmured something soft in the top's ear.

That solved one mystery that had been teasing my mind: I'd been wondering whether the green-eyed Seeker had any interest in the youth other than business. I remembered my imaginings about the youth's hero worship. Well, maybe that was how their mate-bond had begun, but judging from the way that the green-eyed Seeker listened silently to what the youth was saying, it was clear who was the top in this relationship now.

It was disconcerting to learn that the youth I'd thought so soft was serving as leader to a top like this. Not that I let that stop me from being angry at his idiocy. I waited till the youth and I were seated together again, and I was sure that the green-eyed Seeker was immersed in his work. Then I hissed at the youth, "Don't you ever leave us alone again! Don't you realize he's on the point of breaking?"

From the tension in the youth's body, I guessed that he did. He said stiffly, "I apologize, Mr. Little. You were in no danger, but I should not have placed you in a position where you felt that you had anything to fear."

Typical top nonsense. They're incapable of thinking about anyone but themselves, so if you express concern over the welfare of another human being, they think you're worried only about yourself. Mind you, in this case I suspected there was at least a little concern on the youth's side for what was happening to the green-eyed Seeker. I've been around enough men who are best mates with each other to recognize that bond when I see it.

"This is ridiculous," I said, still keeping my voice low so the green-eyed Seeker wouldn't hear. "If you think he would be helped by getting back to work, why don't you just hand me over to another Seeker and go to work together on another case?"

"That's not permitted by our Code, unless it's in the best interests of the prisoner."

Bloody rules; I ought to have known that a top would worry more about business regulations than about his best mate. Even from a business point of view, it seemed to me that the youth was being shortsighted. When an owner becomes too ill to work any more, the business always suffers before a new owner is found. And if the owner loses his head and begins giving insane orders . . . I'd been in a situation like that, and the top had

done a lot of damage before the tops working for him had gotten up the courage to throw him out of the business.

I'd seen the green-eyed Seeker's look when I arrived. I knew what sort of damage that bloke could do.

And that he was on the point of breaking I no longer doubted. It's never pleasant, watching a man slowly lose his mind; it has happened to enough mates of mine to sicken me. What I couldn't understand – I'll *never* understand this about tops – is how the youth could watch this happening to his best mate and not abandon his work immediately. What the bloody blades did it matter whether I or any other prisoner was broken, if his mate's mind was lost in the process? What is it about tops that makes them care more about running a business than about the people around them?

I was beginning to respect the green-eyed Seeker, though. Day after day he sat in the corner, his mind unravelling – and he was clearly aware that his mind was unravelling. Yet never once did he interrupt the youth's conversations with me or ask for any sort of help. It was bloody stupid, but it was the type of stupidity I could admire.

So I knew that matters had reached a crisis point the day that the green-eyed Seeker suddenly threw his writing board to the ground with a crash, pressed his legs against his chest, and cradled his head in his arms. His body was shaking again.

The youth looked back, made one of his idiotic apologies to me again, and went over to kneel by the Seeker. I couldn't hear what the two of them were saying; Seekers are the softest talkers I've ever run across. After a while, the youth helped the green-eyed Seeker to his feet and said, "I'll be back in a minute, Mr. Little."

He was as good as his word; he was back in the cell in one minute flat. The green-eyed Seeker wasn't with him. I stared at the youth in alarm. I didn't like the idea of a mad top wandering around the dungeon alone. "Where is he?" I asked.

"The High Seeker is waiting in the next cell for us to finish here," the youth replied.

It took me a moment to realize what he was saying; then my jaw dropped. "You're making mock," I said. "You locked your *mate* in a cell?"

He stiffened; I'd forgotten the top propensity for pretending they didn't have any special relations with the men they worked with. "The High Seeker thought it best that he wait next door," he said. "He didn't want to be a disturbance to our work here."

I don't think I'd been so angry since the day Mendel beat the boy. That was cruel enough, but to lock up your best mate when you know that he's on the point of mind-death, just so that you can finish a bit of business . . . I'd always known that tops' mercilessness knew no bounds, but I'd never imagined anything like this.

"You bloody idiot!" I shouted. "Get out of here! Go back and get your mate out of that cell, take him home, give him something warm to drink, tuck him into bed, and then sing songs to him or whatever you tops do to bring people back to themselves!"

"There's no need to shout, Mr. Little," the youth said in an infuriatingly calm manner. "If you don't feel like continuing our conversation today, I can come back tomorrow."

Typical top: you give him a gift, and he thinks you're asking for a gift. "Come back in two weeks!" I shouted. "I don't want to see you till then!" If he wanted to think me a frightened prisoner, so be it, as long as he took care of that mate of his.

Well, he returned to my cell the next evening, at his usual time. I would have bashed in his head, except that it was clear from the tension in his body that he hadn't had a good day. Perhaps the singing hadn't worked.

"Where's your mate?" I asked before he could speak.

"The High Seeker's location isn't important," he said. "Now, we were talking yesterday about a prisoner's right to follow his own conscience . . ."

I could guess well enough where the green-eyed Seeker was. I imagined him locked in the next cell, pressed all in a ball as he strove to keep back

madness on his own, while his best mate engaged in chit-chat with a prisoner.

I'd just about made up my mind before the youth arrived, but that settled it. "Right," I said briskly. "I've decided to follow my conscience. I want to make my confession."

He looked startled; even a clever top can be incapable of recognizing what's in front of his nose. He recovered quickly, though. He called in the burly guard – the guards didn't have to strain to record my words from behind the door after all – and then he had me describe what I'd done. I was brief about it, saying I'd killed Mendel with my own hand, with no one else's assistance, and that I wasn't sorry for what I'd done. That seemed enough of a confession to me, but the youth insisted that I say for the record what I'd told him about Mendel's character and about him beating the boy. I suppose he thought that would make me look better at the trial.

I could have told him otherwise; I'd been in and out of the magistrates' judging rooms enough times not to have any soppish illusions. All the magistrates are tops, after all.

I was eager to get the youth out of my cell and back to the green-eyed Seeker, but he, being a top, was utterly oblivious to what was going on. I swear, I think he even believed I was angry at him for spending time worrying about his best mate. He would never have guessed that I despised him most for not putting his mate's interests first.

At one point he told me that he'd asked the High Seeker two nights before whether it would be possible to bypass the dungeon rule that prisoners could only be offered eternal confinement in the Eternal Dungeon if they repented of their crimes. Bothering his mate with business at a time like this! Honestly, the midwives must do something to tops' minds at birth to keep them from having any sense of reason.

After I'd given my confession, the youth insisted that he needed to spend time with me to prepare me for the next day. Since he was being stubborn about this, I made him send a message to his mate, by way of the guards, that I'd given my confession. I hoped that the news would be enough to pull the green-eyed Seeker back by whatever slender thread attached him to sanity.

The youth and I had a nice conversation that evening, I'll grant that. I wasn't much surprised to learn that he'd been a prisoner himself – his earlier remark about being broken had made me wonder – but it was a shock to hear what he'd been charged with, especially when, at my insistence, he recited the gory details of what had happened. Well, you never know about tops: you think one's a soft puppy, and you learn he's a cold-blooded kin-murderer. It helped me to understand, though, why he hadn't given me any lectures about what a bad baby I'd been. He wasn't really in a position to do so.

He was able to tell me what my trial would be like, and we talked a bit about the hangman. It turned out that the youth had thought, up till the last moment of his own trial, that he'd be executed. I didn't have any illusions about last-minute reprieves – the youth had been one of those prisoners who stated his repentance in his confession – but still, it was nice to talk about shared experiences. Reminded me of the times I'd spent with my mates, grousing about what we suffered under the tops.

There's not much more to tell. The trial was the travesty I'd figured it would be; the youth did his best for me, but I could tell that the magistrate had taken one look at me and started fitting me for hemp-rope. Afterwards, the youth wanted to accompany me to the executioner, but I told him that I wasn't like his mate, needing an escort. I was eager to get the youth out of there before he went soppish on me.

No such luck. He said softly, "I'll always remember you."

I laughed then, but he said earnestly, "I mean it. The other Seekers all say they remember their first prisoner."

"I was your first?" I was pleased, I'll admit. It's always nice to know that you've taken someone's cherry.

"The first and undoubtedly my worst," he said, all his soppishness disappearing in that disconcerting fashion of his. "If the High Seeker gives me another one like you, I'll go into retirement."

I laughed again, clapped him on the back, and said, "Get out of here. Your mate's waiting for you."

He left, laughing. That was for my benefit, I think; he knew by now how I hated soppishness. I was left to deal with a fool guard who thought I'd been assaulting a Seeker and wanted to warn me against making an attempt to escape.

Like I had any chance of that. The guards returned me to my bindings and escorted me out. As we were travelling down the corridor, I saw the youth again. He was with the green-eyed Seeker, who'd been at the trial, but who'd been seated at the back of the judging room, behind me; I'd caught only a brief glimpse of him till now.

I don't think either of them believed they'd be seen; they were in a dark alcove off the corridor, and their hoods were raised. The youth had his back to me, so I never saw what his face looked like, but I could see the green-eyed Seeker's face, because he was embracing the youth and had his head resting upon the youth's shoulder. The lines in his face were relaxed. I guessed that he had managed to make his way back to sanity by that slender thread.

Well, he'd better have; that's all I can say. The guards hustled me along, so I didn't see much more, but I caught the moment when the green-eyed Seeker raised his head high enough to give the youth a kiss on the cheek. It was the sweetest portrait of mate-bonding I've ever seen.

Bloody blades, what a sop I've become. I still don't understand why I did it. What kind of idiot bottom sacrifices himself for the sake of two tops, one of them someone he barely knows and the other his torturer? It doesn't make sense.

I'll tell you something that's even odder, though. I didn't eat breakfast before the trial – my stomach wasn't up to it – so I know that the youth couldn't have slipped any silver pot-herb into me. Yet since seeing those two tops hugging each other in the corridor, I've been floating, and everything around me looks piercingly beautiful. I can't make sense of it, but it's a nice way to go. Even the hood they just put over my head doesn't change how I feel.

Maybe the youth will remember me after all.

o—o—o
o—o—o

. . . The list consists of thousands of names, most of which have been crossed out. Prisoners who have suffered execution leave no records of their life.

We turn now to the (probably apocryphal) tale of Layle Smith's nervous breakdown in his thirty-sixth year, and how he was saved from madness by a prisoner who sacrificed his own life for the sake of the High Seeker.

As historians continue to emphasize, although Layle Smith's brief entrance into madness is recorded by a number of reliable historical sources, there is not a single piece of evidence from Layle Smith's time to support the tale about a prisoner being the man who drew the High Seeker back from his madness. Yet this tale appears in no less than a dozen ballads that were passed around among the Yclau commoners, and in modern times this folk legend has entered into the history books. It is a shame that we will never know whether this episode actually occurred, but it shows the power of the commoners to make their mark upon history in their own manner. Or as members of the Eternal Dungeon would have put it, it shows the central importance of the prisoners.

Several months after Layle Smith began to emerge from his madness of 356, a visitor to the Eternal Dungeon praised the bravery of the Seekers, who risked their lives daily to work among dangerous criminals. Layle Smith's reply now hangs upon the wall of virtually every office of psychology in our nation:

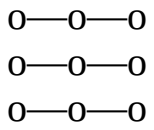
"Searching other people is easy. Allowing oneself to be searched is an act of courage."

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

Rebirth
HISTORICAL NOTE

The Eternal Dungeon is my Gothic Revival series, about a medieval-style dungeon within a Victorian-style society. As such, the series initially has as little connection to Victorian history as a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Only gradually, as the series progresses, will Victorian social forces begin to exert themselves upon the dungeon.

The lack of strong Victorian references in the first novel is therefore not accidental. The anachronistically medieval state of the Eternal Dungeon in this novel represents the state of many Victorian institutions that would later find themselves, with shock, confronting the societal demands of the modern world.



=== *Transformation* ===

> O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.
>
> Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.
>
> Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.
>
> For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.
>
> Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me.
>
> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.
>
> Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
>
> If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

—Psalm 139:1-12 (King James Version).

Transformation 1
DECEPTION

The year 357, the sixth month.

Every psychologist of our day knows the origin of transformation therapy, though many prefer not to speak of it. It is considered embarrassing to be forced to admit that your primary tool for curing patients was developed by a group of torturers.

In popular tales told about the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon, it is often said that the method of transforming twisted criminals into human beings of healthy spirit was developed by a single, particularly talented torturer. Of course, the truth is far more complex. Many torturers – or "Seekers," as torturers in the Golden Age preferred to call themselves – contributed to the principles of transformation therapy. Indeed, it is likely that our debt to most of the Seekers has been obscured by the loss of records over time. We who work in the modern profession of psychology will never fully know what courageous acts were committed to bring about the development of transformation therapy. Therefore, we will never fully know what we owe the men who worked in the Eternal Dungeon . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

The common room was filled with dozens of Seekers and guards, all trying to avoid looking at the man in the back of the room.

Weldon Chapman, pausing at the doorway to check that the face-cloth of his hood was properly closed, surveyed the scene. The ploys that the men in the room were using to disguise their interest were various: a cup of beer held before the face, an absorbed study of a chessboard, and of course, in the case of the Seekers, the device they used with their prisoners – they simply kept the face-cloths of their hoods down, as their duty required.

Weldon doubted that the man at the back of the room was fooled by any of this. Indeed, even Weldon, without that man's skill, could see the tension in the onlookers' bodies, the flickered glances, the tight gestures, and the occasional twitch from someone who had let his nightmares become too vivid.

Weldon sighed, and then turned his attention to the one man in the room who was making no pretense of being interested in anything except the figure in the back. As Weldon watched, Elsdon Taylor flung down the playing cards he had been holding, said something to the other junior Seekers sharing his table, and left amidst their nervous laughter.

He did not, as Weldon had expected, go straight to the man in the back; he simply lifted his hand toward that man. The man, who was resting with his face turned upward toward the sunlight that filtered through the crystalline ceiling of the common room, and who gave every appearance of being asleep, raised his hand in exchange. Around the common room, there was a visible shudder at this evidence of the High Seeker's skill.

"There is something particularly frightening about having a genius go mad."

Weldon tore his eyes away from Layle Smith in order to look over at the High Seeker's love-mate, Elsdon Taylor. The skin around Elsdon's eyes was smudged with darkness – Weldon wondered how many months it had been since Elsdon had received a full shift's sleep – but otherwise the

young man looked less weighed down than he had since his present trials began.

Weldon took hope from that, and from Elsdon's dark jibe. He knew better than to worry the High Seeker's love-mate with questions, though, so he simply said, "I was trying to decide whether I should bother him with work."

Elsdon glanced over his shoulder at the man lying motionless in his chair. "Do," he said, in the same soft voice with which he had spoken before. "If anything would make him go mad again, it's having nothing to do except documentwork. If you have a challenge for him, he'd welcome it."

"He ought to be back at work with the prisoners."

Elsdon sighed. "So I tell him. So the Codifier tells him. So the *Queen* tells him. Honest in my heart, Weldon, if the torture-god of Layle's native land came and threatened to rack him eternally unless he returned to work, Layle would simply repeat that he is not yet ready to place the prisoners at risk."

"Mm." Weldon stared down at the papers he was holding in his hand. "Perhaps I can persuade him otherwise. Are you leaving for bed now?"

Elsdon shook his head. "Not till he does. He doesn't yet trust himself that much."

Glancing once more at the men in the common room – who were now dividing their time between casting nervous glances at the High Seeker and casting curious glances at his love-mate – Weldon thought to himself that nothing could have made more apparent to the world the seriousness of Layle Smith's illness than the fact that the High Seeker felt the need for a chaperone. The fact that no such chaperone was necessary could not be known by the others. Weldon frowned.

"What your love-mate needs," he says, "is a stiffening of the backbone. He needs to be reminded that he is not a child, and that he owes responsibilities to the dungeon he runs."

Elsdon gave a crow of such pure delight that every head in the room swivelled to look at him. Elsdon ignored them, thumping Weldon on the

back. "Oh, brave one," he said. "You should have been a soldier. I'll watch the battle from a distance. From a safe distance," he added with a grin in his voice.

"Fortunate man," Weldon muttered and walked toward the man at the back.

Whether or not the High Seeker's acute hearing had picked up the gist of the conversation, Weldon could be quite sure that Layle Smith knew from Elsdon's cry of joy that an attack was about to begin. The High Seeker gave no sign that he was about to strike back. Of course, he never did. Many a prisoner had learned that, when it was too late.

The common room was a newer room in the Eternal Dungeon, built at a time when one of Layle's predecessors had grown so tired of his confinement within the bleak walls of the underground cave that he had ordered a leisure place built that would provide sunlight to the Seekers who were otherwise deprived of daylight for the remainder of the lives. Weldon, whose own vow as a Seeker had come relatively late in life, nevertheless felt his limbs relax as the warmth of the early morning sun fell upon his shoulders. It was midsummer now – he knew that from the calendar posted by the dungeon's Record-keeper for the sake of Seekers who might otherwise forget what season it was. Summertime always made Weldon remember the last time he had been in the lighted world. The joy he had felt on that final day – the knowledge that he was about to receive a privilege that any prison worker in the queendom of Yclau would have envied – had been as pure and unadulterated as the blue sky above him.

He had met Layle by that time. He sometimes wondered whether the joy he had felt at becoming a Seeker had been connected with the knowledge that he would be able to speak daily with a talented young Seeker by the name of Layle Smith.

That was thirteen years ago. Now Layle was thirty-seven, Weldon was forty-seven, and the High Seeker lay motionless in his chair, as though dead.

"Sir," Weldon said formally.

"Mr. Chapman," the High Seeker replied without opening his eyes. "Tell me, are you bothered by nightmares?"

Weldon had to stop himself from looking over at one of the men who had twitched. "Not overly much, sir," he responded. "Why?"

"I am glad to hear that. Mr. Taylor was a victim of some very bad nightmares several months ago, when my condition was more serious. Now that I am slowly healing he is, of course, feeling much better. I remain confident that the nightmares will not return . . . provided that no one is so foolish as to try to hurry my cure beyond the point for which my mind is ready."

Weldon was still a moment. Then he pulled up a chair and sat down heavily in it. "High Seeker," he said, "I wonder why the Record-keeper bothers to assign prisoners to anyone besides you. If he sent all the criminals your way, the Eternal Dungeon would have a perfect record of breaking prisoners."

He thought he saw the faintest crease of amusement at the corner of Layle Smith's eyes as the High Seeker lifted his hooded head. "Since I am not seeing prisoners at the moment, the matter is moot. You wished to speak to me about another matter?"

Weldon wordlessly gestured to the papers in his lap. Layle glanced at the name written atop them and said, "Ah, yes. The Record-keeper does like to assign you the hard cases."

"The Record-keeper," said Weldon carefully, "is under the misapprehension that, since I dwelt so many years in the lighted world, I am privy to its secrets."

"You have dealt with difficult prisoners before."

"Not prisoners who confess that they have committed a 'most terrible crime,' but refuse to state what that crime is."

"Mm." The High Seeker leaned back in his chair. His gaze had not strayed from Weldon throughout the conversation, though from where Weldon sat, he could see that Elsdon had seated himself at an empty table nearby, out of earshot, and was busy scribbling with a pen.

Weldon flipped through his own papers for a moment before he found the one he wanted, with the High Seeker's initials in the corner to indicate that

he had read it. He held it up for Layle's inspection.

For the second time, the suggestion of a smile appeared in Layle's eyes. "At least she was honest. Women who apply to be Seekers usually sign only their initials, not their full names. I sent her a polite note, explaining that she did not possess the quality we desire most in a Seeker. It is what I tell nearly all of our applicants."

"She is not the best candidate to be a Seeker if she commits a crime soon after you have rejected her application."

Layle said nothing, but the smile in his eyes increased.

Weldon felt his spirits lift accordingly. "You think she is innocent of any crime? That this is a ploy to visit the Eternal Dungeon?"

"A ploy to see me. She asked for me specifically when she was delivered here by her local prison."

"So I had heard. Perhaps it would be better, then, if you took this case."

Layle's gaze shot away from the paper. His smile disappeared, like warmth dissipating with the coming of evening.

"Sir," Weldon said quietly as he placed the paper back on his lap, "I know what you want me to say. But the best interests of the prisoner come first, and having reviewed the prisoner's records, I believe that it is in her best interests to be searched by you. If I search her, nothing will happen except that she will stall and refuse to speak until you come. That would be a waste of time I could spend with a prisoner who has actually committed a crime."

Layle's eye wandered away from Weldon, skimming the crowd of men that sat drinking, playing leisure games, and talking. "No doubt you will find a way around this problem."

"But, sir, you need only spend a few minutes—"

"No."

"Sir, if you will only listen to what I have to—"

"I cannot visit your prisoner!"

Once, when Weldon was considerably younger, he had awoken screaming from a vision of being sliced in half by the High Seeker's whip. It was but a nightmare, of course; Layle Smith had not carried a whip since his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon.

This was a worse nightmare. Weldon tried without success to remember the last time he had heard the High Seeker raise his voice. He tried to reply, but could not; he tried to move, but could not. He was trapped in place as effectively as a chained prisoner by the sight of the High Seeker, one yard from him, beginning to shake.

Weldon managed to tear his gaze away to look at the rest of the room. What he saw was like a battlefield after a cannon had been shot through it. Chairs were overturned; some of the chairs' owners were standing frozen in place, but others were missing, and Weldon guessed that a stream of guards and Seekers was presently fleeing down the hallway that led from the common room to the inner dungeon. Where they thought they could flee to, Weldon could not imagine. The guards, perhaps, were seeking the main exit to the lighted world, but the Seekers had no such option open to them, being bound by their oaths to remain in the dungeon.

Other signs of terror lay before him: broken glasses, overspilled wine, and chess pieces and cards lying still upon the floor. A shadow moved behind the bar counter, and Weldon guessed that the guard taking bar-tending duty today must have ducked down, in hopes that his presence would be forgotten. From the expressions on the faces of the other guards in the room, it was clear that they would have liked to join him, while the Seekers – normally the most imperturbable of men – were turning their heads toward each other, obviously uncertain what to do.

Only one man in the room did not hesitate. As Weldon watched, Elsdon walked forward, pen and papers in hand, and knelt next to the High Seeker's chair.

For a moment, Weldon could have cursed the young man for emphasizing to Layle his infirmity. But he underestimated the junior Seeker; Elsdon held out his papers and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but I need these initialled. Could I bother you?"

Layle took the pen from him in an automatic manner and flipped through the papers, reading them rapidly. Weldon, stealing a glance at the papers, saw that they were routine documents which could easily have waited until Layle was on duty again. He turned his gaze to Elsdon and saw that the kneeling Seeker had his eyes fixed upon Layle. For a brief moment, Weldon felt pain go through him, as cutting as a lash. Then he switched his attention back to the High Seeker.

Layle had finished initialling all the pages, and his hand was now steady. He gave back the papers and pen, saying quietly, "Thank you, Mr. Taylor."

Elsdon nodded without spoken reply, gave Weldon an impenetrable glance, and returned to his seat, where he calmly continued writing where he had left off.

Weldon could actually hear the sigh of the crowd as the men began to pick up the mess around them. Two or three guards, shamefaced, returned to the room. The bartender emerged from his hiding place holding a shattered mug, as though his only purpose in diving to the floor had been to help with the clean-up.

Layle pretended not to notice any of this. He said, in the same low voice as before, "Mr. Chapman, I trust I need not remind you of what event took place in this dungeon nine years ago, and what restriction was placed upon me following that event."

Weldon felt a hot blush cover his skin, from forehead to toes. "I am sorry, sir. It has been many years—"

"The restriction still applies. Naturally, the Codifier would permit me to visit your prisoner if he considered it necessary for the welfare of this dungeon, but I see no reason to request his permission. You have the experience necessary to break this prisoner."

"Yes, sir," Weldon murmured, casting a glance at the shambles nearby. Amidst the quiet storm of the clean-up operation, Elsdon sat like a rock, scribbling upon his papers.

Noting the direction of Weldon's gaze, Layle said, "I am afraid that Mr. Taylor has his own difficult prisoner to deal with at the moment. His

prisoner has spun a web of self-deception that has tangled his soul. Regardless of whether the man has committed a crime, he requires Mr. Taylor's help."

Weldon did his best to gather his wits together, like an apprentice trying to chase down a ball of sinew-yarn that he has dropped. "Of course, sir. In any case, female prisoners are my specialty."

"I had not forgotten that. I am sure you remember this, but I will repeat the rules by which you abide: Ask the prisoner if she wants a chaperone present while you search her. If she prefers that you search her privately, be sure to have a guard keep an eye on you through the watch-hole every moment that you are inside the cell. The last thing I need is for one of my Seekers to be arrested upon a false charge of rape."

Weldon could think of nothing to reply to this, so he nodded. He found himself saying, though, "I am tempted to ask the Record-keeper to give me another prisoner."

Layle raised his eyebrows, but said only, "Well, you would have free choice. There are half a dozen prisoners awaiting Seekers at the moment."

"That many?" Weldon could not keep surprise from his voice. Usually new prisoners were assigned a Seeker immediately, since the period following their arrest was the time in which they were most vulnerable and therefore most likely to confess to any crime they might have committed.

Layle gave a brief nod. "We are rather short of Seekers at the moment, what with so many senior Seekers retiring or taking healing leave." He reached over to the table that stood between himself and Weldon and lifted his wine cup to his lips, draining it of its dregs.

Watching him, Weldon found he was cursing himself inwardly. It could not be at all easy for Layle, knowing that prisoners were languishing without Seekers while he himself, the most talented Seeker in the dungeon, was spending his days doing documentwork. Only a very strong conviction that it would be dangerous for him to go near prisoners could have kept Layle from rushing back to work and breaking all six prisoners in quick succession. The man must be in agony now, pulled between two calls of duty, and Weldon had made the matter no easier for him.

In an attempt to lighten Layle's mood, Weldon forced a chuckle and said, "Perhaps you should train my prisoner to be a Seeker after all."

Layle gave a snort of what might have been laughter, but said seriously, "Not if you put me on a Vovimian rack and set the wheel to the thirtieth level. I would rather run this dungeon with only one Seeker than allow an ill-qualified Seeker into a cell with a prisoner."

Weldon nodded slowly; he knew what Layle meant. They had both been in the Eternal Dungeon – Layle as a Seeker, Weldon as a guard – when Layle's predecessor, faced with a similar crisis of waiting prisoners, had allowed a new Seeker to take his vow of eternal confinement after only one month's training. As it turned out, the man was talented in certain respects but did not possess the quality that, as Layle had put it a while ago, "we desire most in a Seeker." And after the new Seeker had spent a week with one of the prisoners who had been waiting to be searched . . .

Changes were made after that. Strict rules were instituted, requiring a minimum of six months of training from new Seekers before they took their vows of eternal confinement. The offending Seeker, unable to be released from his oath, made matters easier for everyone by expressing a desire to spend the remainder of his life working in the outer dungeon, where he would not have contact with prisoners. Most importantly, greater precautions were taken to ensure that no prisoner would have the means to kill himself. But Weldon, who had guarded the prisoner, still visited the dungeon's crematorium every few months and lit a candle for the prisoner, hoping that the prisoner was receiving greater mercy in his new life than he had received in his old.

He still wondered whether he could have prevented the tragedy, and guilt still touched him late at night. He could only imagine the weight of guilt that Layle's predecessor must have felt until his death two years later. Weldon could well suppose that Layle, already heavily burdened with guilt over other matters, would not want to take the chance of allowing anyone to become a Seeker-in-Training unless that person had shown clearly that they possessed the quality which was absolutely necessary to a Seeker.

"Have no worries, sir," Weldon said. "I think this prisoner will be easy to handle. I will deal with her quickly and then pass on to another prisoner."

Layle's eyes touched his. They were green, like the trees Weldon had not seen in thirteen years, and their light touch was enough to bind Weldon to his place, half-risen from his seat.

Then Layle released him, turning his eyes away. "I am sure you will do your best, Mr. Chapman."

His voice was cool and dismissive. Sometimes Weldon wondered whether his memories of another voice – a voice young and uncertain, filled with hopes that would be dashed shortly thereafter – had come from his own imagination.

He nearly knelt – childhood habits died hard – but caught himself in time and nodded his farewell instead. He walked his way to the door of the common room, ignoring the stares of the men wondering what he had done to bring the High Seeker so close to madness again.

CHAPTER TWO

"You worked at Parkside Prison?" said Weldon, unable to hide his surprise.

The prisoner smiled. "Not officially," she said. "Did you work there, before you came here?"

"Me?" Weldon gave a sharp laugh. "Not in the least. If I had worked at any of the lesser prisons, it would have been at Alleyway Prison."

The prisoner looked puzzled for a moment; then she too laughed, in an easy manner. "Of course," she said. "I thought there was something odd about your accent. You have risen far in the world."

"Indeed." Weldon was watching her closely as he spoke, scrutinizing her for signs of how this news would affect her. He had never tried to hide this fact of his past from anyone, for he had found over the years that the knowledge of it usually had one of two effects on his prisoners. If the prisoner was high-born, he was likely to be highly offended to learn that he was being searched by a man who had been born a commoner. If the prisoner was also low-born, he was likely to be jealous. In either case, Weldon knew how to handle the matter.

Weldon could not remember the last time he had met a prisoner of high birth who seemed delighted to be searched by a Seeker of common origins. "Are there many people with your background working in the dungeon?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not in the inner dungeon," he said. "Not among the guards and Seekers. I started work here in the outer dungeon, whose workers help to keep the Eternal Dungeon alive with food and fuel and other such services. It is fairly common for guards to rise to the position of Seeker, but I know of no other cases where an outer dungeon worker has become a guard and then a Seeker."

He let his eyes rest lightly upon her as he spoke. He could guess that she was asking this question because she wished to know whether the Eternal Dungeon was idiosyncratic in its method of hiring. In truth it was, a fact more due to the character of the High Seeker than to any rules enshrined in

the *Code of Seeking*. But Weldon did not wish to raise false expectations in the prisoner.

"You have women working here? I thought I heard a woman's voice in the corridor."

Weldon suppressed a smile at this direct question. "Not in the inner dungeon. Many of the outer dungeon workers are women – you must have heard one of our cleaning women."

"Ah." The prisoner showed no sign of disappointment. "Yes, it is like that at Parkside Prison too. Women are welcome in the outer areas of the prison, but they are not permitted to have contact with the prisoners."

"Mistress . . ." He hesitated.

"Birdesmond," she supplied.

"I thought you might prefer to be referred to as Mistress Manx."

She smiled again. "I would if I were a man. But as you can see, I am a woman."

"Mm." Weldon tried not to let his eye roam; he had learned long ago that this made female prisoners understandably nervous.

Having deliberately avoided the portion of Birdesmond Manx's records that gave her personal information, such as her date of birth, he had drawn two competing images in his mind of what she would look like. One image was of a scrawny girl, still at the age of sexlessness and confusion over what it means to be a woman. The other image, more sinister, had been of a mannish spinster, loud and aggressive, demanding to be called by her family name as though she were a man, and undoubtedly wearing bloomers.

The prisoner before him fit neither of these images. She was a soft-spoken, attractive woman in her early thirties, with her hair swept onto her head in a manner that emphasized rather than detracted from her femininity. In accordance with the customs of the Eternal Dungeon, she had been permitted to keep her own clothing, and in accordance with the customary treatment of female prisoners, her body had not been searched. The latter

custom had once resulted in Weldon being stabbed by a concealed knife, and he found his gaze flicking down toward the dress that might conceal anything. It too was utterly feminine, with its tight waist and ballooning skirt and high collar. The only concession to comfort seemed to be the dress's cloth, which was a practical flannel, and the low-heeled boots, which Weldon had noticed briefly when Mistress Birdesmond curtsied politely upon his entrance.

It was just as well concerning the boots, as she had refused Weldon's offer to take a seat, a courtesy only offered to female prisoners. Weldon wondered whether she was trying to prove that she was as strong as a man. Manifestly, she was not: her frame was slight, and he could easily overpower her if she became violent.

Not that he would do so except in the most extreme circumstances; the Code declared that such matters must be left to the guards. For this reason, Seekers were hired for their mental powers, not their bodily strength. Weldon hoped that Birdesmond did not know this.

"You were speaking of Parkside Prison," he prompted.

"Yes, well . . . Commoners are not so absent from that prison as you might think, Mr. Chapman. It is true that its officials and guards are high-born, but most of the prisoners are commoners – servants from households in the Parkside district."

Weldon raised his eyebrows. "The rich in Parkside do not commit crimes?"

"The rich have money to bribe the soldiers to overlook their crimes," she replied tartly. "And alas, the rich have the influence to persuade prison officials to take different courses of action with their prisoners. . . . Many years ago, I had a maidservant whose man was arrested on a charge of petty thievery. She begged me to go to the head of the prison and intervene on her man's behalf, as she feared he would be dealt with harshly. I accompanied her to the prison and was appalled by what I saw there: dozens of families crammed into the outside room, waiting to see the prisoners or to plead on their behalf. No attempt had been made to provide proper waiting space for these people. Any high-born visitor was ushered immediately into the keeper's office, but the common folk were required to sit on the floor, with no access to water or other such comforts. Babies

were screaming, young women were weeping, and the guards took no notice of any of them, except to kick them out of the way when new prisoners arrived.

"It was as though I had stumbled upon the scene of a great fire or flood. I had no idea what to do first. Ignoring the protests of the guards, who wanted to draw me from this room as quickly as possible, I sat down and minded the babies and comforted the young women and talked with the older women. The next time I came, I made sure I was supplied with plenty of food and water, until, after several weeks of this, the prison officials were shamed into providing somewhat better facilities for the prisoners' families."

"I should imagine your work would have been done then." Weldon was trying to react to this recital with a mildly interested expression, as though he had never heard such a tale before. In fact, much of this story had been told in Birdesmond's application to become a Seeker. In reading the account, Weldon had been unable to make up his mind whether the writer had been motivated by naïveté or by a desire to bully the prison officials. Now he recognized, from the matter-of-fact tone of her voice, that Birdesmond was simply practical. She had done what she thought needed to be done, in the unfussed manner of a competent nurse or schoolmistress.

A slow smile curled its way onto Birdesmond's lips. "I suppose it would have been, if I had not heard by then the stories of the families and realized how much remained to be done."

The rest of the tale was easily told: Birdesmond's unplanned journey to becoming the confidante of the prisoners' families, the person that the women and children turned to and told their secrets to, certain that she would not betray their best interests, even if she believed that what their menfolk had done was wrong. Gradually Birdesmond came to believe that she could have equal success in persuading the prisoners to confide in her – better success at least than the prison workers, whose harsh indifference to the prisoners' fates invariably elicited nothing more than terrified lies or cynical evasions.

"I had the opportunity to test this theory," she said. "My uncle's manservant was arrested for arson soon thereafter. My uncle was convinced that another man had committed the crime, and he persuaded the prison officials, over their better judgment, to release the manservant and arrange for the arrest of the other man. But I was sure that the manservant had done the deed. I talked to him and was able to make him see that it would be wrong for him to let another man suffer imprisonment for his own crime. . . . The manservant's self-deception as to what he had done lay deep; it took many days of talk between us before I could begin to reach the core of the lies he had used to shield himself from his pain, and to help him find a way toward healing himself. It troubles me that no one in the place where he is now imprisoned is willing to help him transform himself, but he and I continue to correspond, and I am convinced that he is better off where he is now than he would have been if he had continued his life of self-deception. Certainly the innocent man who was released is better off."

Weldon paused a moment to see whether she would add protests that none of this was due to her own abilities, or whether, on the contrary, she would boast of her accomplishment. She did neither. Having told her tale in the briefest manner possible, she added, "I wanted very much to learn how to be better at this, and to find a way to help other men who had been arrested. But the officials at Parkside Prison would not permit me to work with the prisoners. Even if they had, I doubt that the workers there could have taught me anything more than I had figured out on my own."

"And then you learned that such training was offered to Seekers," said Weldon.

She smiled, saying nothing.

"And committed a crime of your own," he added.

Her smile did not waver; she nodded. "A most terrible crime."

"I do not suppose you are yet ready to speak about that crime?" he said softly.

"Not yet," she said. "No doubt I will in the end. But . . . Well, I am sure you have had reluctant prisoners before."

Her smile was so engaging that Weldon could not forebear a chuckle.

"Including women prisoners?" she asked.

He gave her a sharp look to see whether she was being coquettish, but it appeared that she was not aiming to use her feminine powers against him. So he let the conversation travel down the path she wished; this was often the best way with prisoners who seemed likely to cooperate in the end. "Yes, this dungeon is one of only a dozen places in Yclau that is authorized to search prisoners who have committed death-sentence crimes. It takes special training to search prisoners who are likely to be violent, and we receive too few women to justify starting a second dungeon for female prisoners alone. So we find ways to cope with the difficulties of such prisoners."

"Ah." Birdesmond seemed amused by his remark. Until now she had been holding her gloves in her ivory-skinned hands, lightly fingering the calfskin, but now she stuffed them into her skirt pocket and straightened, as though a turning point had arrived on the path. "Are the female prisoners assigned randomly to any Seeker who is available, or do you use another system to decide who will search female prisoners?"

"Such matters are regulated by the *Code of Seeking*, our book of rules and ethics," Weldon said, keeping his eye carefully upon her. "You have heard of it, I suppose?"

"I have read it – I trust that is not a crime? I found a copy of it in my uncle's library."

"Most of the Code is not a secret. However, the details supplied in the Code as to how its principles are implemented are not published or spoken of to outsiders. I am afraid I cannot answer your question."

He waited to see her rage at him or to weep with frustration, but she only said quietly, "I apologize, sir. It was wrong of me to question you in any case; I am your prisoner."

"Mm." Weldon scrutinized her, seeking signs that she was being sycophantic, but found none. Finally he said, "I do not mind questions,

though I cannot answer all the ones you may ask. I can tell you that many of the female prisoners who arrive here are assigned to me."

"Are you married?"

He was taken aback by the question – not because it had been asked, for he had heard it many times over the years. Female prisoners always seemed to think they could tell something important about him if they knew whether he was a bachelor. However, the question usually came earlier in the searching than this.

"No," he said. "Seekers are not permitted to marry. You may recall that is mentioned in the *Code of Seeking*."

He hoped she would take this hint that she was ill-prepared to be a Seeker, but she said simply, "I fear I did not understand that portion of the Code. Why should it be wrong for a Seeker to be married?"

Weldon could have sighed in relief. He should have guessed that this particular portion of the Code would prove a barrier to the attractive woman in front of him – indeed, he would have been surprised if it wasn't. The only surprise was that this lady was not yet married. "You are engaged?" he said.

"I became engaged last winter," she said. She added with a smile, "I know I am old to be unwedded. The fates know that I have had plenty of suitors, but . . . Well, it is hard to find suitors who are willing to abide a woman whose deepest ambition is to be a prison worker. I have scared away quite a number of men by being honest with them."

"I am glad you found one who was sensible," said Weldon. "I cannot see that there is anything wrong with wishing to help the outcasts of society – it is just a matter of discovering which work is best suited to one's abilities."

He waited to see whether she would be riled by this gentle suggestion, but she simply nodded. "By becoming a nurse, for example."

"Exactly." Weldon felt the prick of annoyance that always stabbed him when a prisoner proved to be more difficult than he had anticipated. This

particular prisoner, it seemed, had already considered her various options. She was not proceeding on her chosen path out of ignorance.

She had a look of polite interest on her face, and he remembered belatedly that she had asked a question. He said, "Since you are engaged, you will understand that two people who are bound together may suffer greatly if one of them is required to remain for a lifetime in a place that the other could leave at will and probably should leave at some point. For this reason, Yclau law forbids life prisoners from entering into marriages, even if circumstances should allow them to have temporary contact with their loves."

"And as a Seeker, you are eternally confined," said Birdesmond, stealing the climax of his speech.

She had, it seemed, read the *Code of Seeking* quite carefully. "Yes," he replied. "We Seekers call ourselves prisoners, for that is what we are by law. We cannot leave this dungeon at any time in our lives except with special permission from the Codifier – our ethical supervisor – and that permission is almost never granted. This being the case, it would be wrong for us to take wives, since we would either have to bind them to similar imprisonment, or else condemn them to a separation at a later date. So anyone who wishes to become a Seeker must give up all hope of ever marrying." He looked pointedly at her.

"I see," she replied. "I had gathered as much from the Code, but it is helpful to hear your explanation of it. Very helpful." She smiled.

And with a jolt of the heart, Weldon recognized that smile. It was the smile of a Seeker who has just learned how he can break a prisoner.

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"She is trying to demonstrate her abilities to me," Weldon reported. "She wishes to show that she has the skills of a Seeker."

Layle Smith nodded. He looked unsurprised. "It was the only reward she could gain by coming here, after all," he said. "She had already explained in her application why we should train her. Now she wishes to give us proof that such training will not be wasted."

"You were her first choice for the witness to such a demonstration, I am sure," Weldon said. "She seems content for now to talk with me, however. How do you suggest I proceed, sir?"

The High Seeker leaned back in his chair, his gaze lifting to the grey ceiling above. Dusk had arrived, in this period between the end of the day shift and the beginning of the night shift. Elsdon, who was assigned to the night shift, was scooping up the playing cards on his table, readying himself for work. Weldon had not bothered to sit down, knowing that the High Seeker would leave this room when Elsdon did, though Layle would secrete himself in his Seeker's cell while Elsdon was away.

"The decision is yours," Layle said finally. "But if you wish my advice . . . Let her play her game. I think she will quickly find that the game is not so easy as she thought, particularly if you are to be her prisoner. Do you know what crime she plans to search you for?"

"Abusing my prisoners, I think. She has hinted at concern for the female prisoners here."

"Has she?" Layle's eyes wandered away from the crystalline ceiling above, to rest upon Weldon.

"Yes," said Weldon, narrowing his eyes to try to read the High Seeker's gaze. It was the most useless exercise he had undertaken in a long time: the High Seeker revealed nothing he did not wish to be revealed. "Is that important?"

"It is of passing interest. I must go, Mr. Chapman."

Weldon turned and saw that Elsdon had reached the doorway and was looking back, waiting for Layle. This too was a game – a delicate game Elsdon played in order to pretend that the High Seeker, not he, was the one in charge of their relationship. Elsdon would never humiliate his love-mate by simply ordering him out of the room; in public, at least, he always gave the appearance of being Layle's subordinate.

And now Weldon must play the same game with his prisoner. He sighed. Really, he wondered whether he should request that no more female prisoners be assigned to him. At least with male prisoners he had a

fighting chance of understanding how their minds worked.

CHAPTER THREE

He arrived the next morning to find Birdesmond lying upon the floor, turned on her side toward the far end of the cell wall.

For a moment, he thought the worst had happened, and he opened his mouth to shout for his guards to fetch the dungeon healer. Then Birdesmond rolled over onto her stomach and turned her head. She was smiling.

"This is marvellous!" she said, struggling up onto her hands and knees. "Simply marvellous!"

"What is?" asked Weldon, who was having to resist the impulse to rush forward and help her to her feet.

"This wall," she said, rising to her feet. The right side and front of her dress was now covered with grey dust, as was her hair. "Do you know, it took me two whole days to understand what you had done here? I honestly thought at first that it was a magic lantern display, used to decorate the room. Instead . . . What a sophisticated way to bring heat and light to a cell! To use glass blocks and place the fire *beyond* the cell – I never would have thought of it."

Weldon was silent, regarding her bedraggled appearance. If this event had occurred on their first meeting, he would have described her behavior as unfeminine, the sort of behavior that one could expect from a woman whose ambition was to be a Seeker. But now . . . She was beginning to brush the dust off her dress in small, ladylike gestures.

He had spent the night trying to remember all the reasons why he and other men he knew had laughed at the idea that women should become Seekers. Women were too moody – they would cry or storm the first time a prisoner opposed them. Women were too tender – they would never have the strength of mind to order a prisoner to be punished. Women were too frail – the very sight of them would cause a prisoner to become defiant and dangerous.

Pairing all those reasons with the women he had known in his life, Weldon began to wonder why he had ever believed such tales. They did not match

many of the women he had known over the years, and they most certainly did not match this lady.

He had fallen asleep not long after that, and had spent the night dreaming of darkness and a missing door. When he awoke exhausted the next morning, his only thought had been the clear understanding that, in the end, there remained one immutable reason to reject an applicant for the position of Seeker: the applicant must be rejected if he did not possess the quality that was absolutely necessary in a Seeker. And this applicant did not. That was reason enough to send her away, without worrying about whether her gender made her unsuitable for the work.

He wondered how he would break the news to her. This was going to be less easy than he had thought.

He stepped forward just as Birdesmond pulled from her seemingly bottomless pocket a small, jeweled comb. Weldon eyed it suspiciously, but its tines did not look sharp enough to use as a weapon, either against him or against herself. She paused in the midst of putting the comb to her hair, looking at the note-card Weldon proffered. She took the note from him, and Weldon hastily withdrew his hand, lest he accidentally touch her.

"Do you see what that is?" he asked, withdrawing several paces.

She held the note up so that the firelight streaming into the cell from the furnace beyond fell square upon the note. "It appears to be a letter from your Codifier, granting you permission to sit in the presence of your prisoner."

"Indeed. Now will you *please* sit down?"

As he spoke, he seated himself at the end of the man-length bench, as close to the door end of the cell as he could manage. Birdesmond, laughing, sat down at the other end. She raised the comb to her hair again and began combing out the dust in long, slow strokes.

Watching her, Weldon was grateful again, as he had been many times over the years, that he was a man of enough self-control that he could be immune to such sights when searching female prisoners. Given the manner in which the High Seeker had been tormented many times over the years,

by the presence of both male and female prisoners, Weldon had no desire to fulfill any of the sickly ballads about Seekers acquiring passion for their prisoners.

She had finished combing her hair and was now brushing off her skirt again. Watching her, Weldon asked abruptly, "What does your family think of your ambitions?"

She looked up. A dimple had appeared in her cheek. "Oh," she said, "I think the closest my parents ever came to reconciling themselves to my dreams is when my mother suggested that, if I tended an innocent high-born prisoner, we might fall in love with one another and marry."

Weldon gave a chuckle and then said, "They are concerned for your safety, no doubt. Prison work can be exceedingly dangerous."

Birdesmond nodded, accepting this statement. "As can nursing. Many of the nurses, you know, work near the battlefields and undergo danger alongside the soldiers. I used to envy them when I heard tales of them as a child."

Weldon was tempted then to search her to see how deep this surface courage extended. But Layle had suggested letting Birdesmond take control of the conversation, and Layle was rarely wrong in his instincts. So Weldon contented himself with asking, "And your fiancé? How does he feel about you working in prisons?"

"Ah." Birdesmond's gaze wandered away as she glanced back at the far end of the cell, with its flames leaping up from the pit below ground level. "Well, I was fortunate to find him. He has encouraged me to visit Parkside Prison – he says that he can think of no better way for a lady to spend her days than by acting in charity toward less fortunate women and children."

"And your ambition to be a Seeker? Does he approve of that as well?"

Birdesmond looked back; her smile was strained. "We have quarrelled about that, I admit."

Her voice was strained too. Weldon suggested gently, "Perhaps he too is concerned about the danger to you. Or perhaps he is simply upset because he knows that you will not be able to marry him if you become a Seeker."

"Perhaps, but that is not the reason he has given for his opposition. He says that no lady would want to work amongst vile criminals – unless, that is, she wished to do so out of immoral desires."

Weldon had to bite back the cry of outrage that rose to his lips. After a minute he said, "Men often speak in anger when they feel threatened. I trust that your fiancé will come to see that your ambition, whether wise or unwise, arises out of pure motives."

"Oh, we have already come to an understanding," she said lightly. "And what of you, Mr. Chapman? Is your family glad that you became a Seeker?"

He was silent a moment. This was not a subject he often spoke of, even to his friends. Finally he said quietly, "My parents are dead. They died in the Commoners' Bread Riot of 339."

Birdesmond was silent a long while before saying softly, "I am sorry. . . . And brothers and sisters? Do you have any?"

He shook himself away from the darkness of his memories. "Two sisters who were married before I was born. I never knew them well. I had five older brothers, but . . . Well, they all died as babies. It was due to malnutrition, I think – our family was always on the edge of starvation. I nearly died as well, and my parents valued me all the more for being the only surviving son."

"You were close to them, then?"

Weldon turned his head toward Birdesmond. She was sitting quietly now, her gaze steady upon him; the comb lay abandoned upon her lap. Weldon found himself wondering how she had learned to question prisoners first about their family background. This method of searching was not mentioned in the *Code of Seeking*, either in the public editions or the private one. It was simply a tip that had been passed from generation to generation of the torturers working in the Eternal Dungeon. It was the best way to proceed with cooperative prisoners: to learn as much as you could about their family background before launching upon a more narrow search of whether they had committed a crime. Small clues learned while

talking about a prisoner's early years could be put to use once the serious searching began.

Weldon was tempted to push her question aside; of all the subjects he would have chosen to talk about, his parents were at the bottom of the list. They were too painful a subject. But, he thought, looking at Birdesmond's steady gaze, perhaps that was why she had chosen to ask him about them. A Seeker, after all, must sometimes apply pain in order to begin a prisoner's breaking. If she had read the *Code of Seeking*, she knew that.

Weldon began to wish that Layle had given him different advice on how to handle Birdesmond. But Weldon remembered his oath. No one said that the life of a Seeker was supposed to be easy and pain-free. Taking in a deep breath, he said, "Even after all these years, I have never met anyone I admire as much as my parents. They lived amidst immorality and crime, yet they rose above it. They taught me that living a life that will lead to a quick rebirth is not a matter of riches or poverty, but a matter of a person's strength of will. And above all, they taught me about love. They were so much in love with one another – it flowed out of them. They taught me that love is the highest gift a person can give, and that any person who cannot love cannot truly be called human. . . . Theirs was the highest love, the love of self-sacrifice. Their passion for one another— Well, it was the stuff of ballads. They would have died for each other—"

He stopped abruptly. Birdesmond asked softly, "Is that how they died?"

It was several moments before he was able to speak again. Then he said in a voice made gruff by pain, "They died for me."

He turned his gaze to the ground. This would not have been wise if he were with a male prisoner, but with a guard at the watch-hole, he thought he could take the chance. It took him another moment to clear his throat so that he could speak again. "I had the early shift at the manufactory where my father and I worked, and I had just set out for work when the protestors came marching down our street, crying out against the rise in bread prices. They were headed for the palace, where they planned to petition the Queen. It was meant to be a peaceful protest; some of the men had brought their wives and children with them. But my parents were worried about me getting caught up in an unlawful protest.

"I had not noticed the protestors; my back was to them, and though their noise was loud, I was absorbed in thoughts of a recently failed courtship. My parents rushed onto the street to alert me to what was happening, and then— Well, then the horsemen arrived."

Birdesmond said nothing. She would have been in school when it happened, Weldon thought, or more likely at home, being privately tutored. He wondered what high-born children were taught about the riot.

He continued, "I turned round and saw my parents and the protestors at the same moment that the horsemen appeared at the end of the street, behind the protestors. A woman screamed, and I heard a man shout, 'They'll kill us all!' I could not believe it at first. I was sure that the soldiers would simply order the protestors to disperse. But the horsemen did not hesitate: they charged right into the crowd, their sabers unsheathed.

"Some of the male protestors had pistols hidden in their clothing; that is when the shooting began. After the horsemen charged, not before. I remember little of what happened next. I must have picked up a saber that was dropped by a dead soldier; I remember swinging it toward a horseman in an attempt to keep him from slashing down at my mother. There was blood on the saber afterwards. The horse reared, and its hoof struck my mother in the forehead. . . . My father was separated from us in the panic. I learned later that one of the soldiers killed him."

Still Birdesmond did not speak. Faintly, the fire in the furnace roared behind her. From behind Weldon, the guard at the watch-hole coughed softly. Weldon hoped that his own voice was low enough that the guard could not hear what he was saying. He did not wish this tale circulated as gossip in the dungeon.

"A third of the protestors died – men, women, and children. The rest escaped or were arrested. Six of the protestors were sent to the Eternal Dungeon, to serve as an example through their executions."

"And you were one of them." Birdesmond's voice remained soft.

Weldon flicked a glance at her, and then turned his gaze back to the ground. "I was the first to be placed on trial. The Queen's courtiers were exultant. They had invited all of the pressmen in the city to cover the trial

– foreign reporters as well as Yclau ones – so that everyone could witness my humiliation. And then, to their consternation, the Seeker in charge of me gave witness that he believed I was telling the truth when I said that we had been attacked without provocation. To make matters worse, the Seeker brought forward the testimonies of the other five prisoners who had been searched in the Eternal Dungeon. All of the testimonies, made independently, corroborated one another. The magistrate had no choice but to rule that I had acted in self-defense and to order my release. And the pressmen – even many of the Yclau reporters – went home and wrote gleeful reports of how the Queen's courtiers had been humiliated by the Eternal Dungeon. . . . The courtiers were livid. There was talk at the time that my Seeker would be placed on trial for his life, for treachery to the Queen."

"And was he?"

"No," said Weldon, a smile touching his lips. "A few years later, the Queen made him High Seeker."

He looked up in time to see that Birdesmond was smiling too. "Ah," she said. "I have heard many tales about Layle Smith."

"Ill ones, no doubt."

"And good ones, too. It intrigued me, how he seems to be equally gifted at acquiring tales that portray him as a dark villain and tales that portray him as Yclau's savior. I should like to meet him someday."

Weldon was glad that his hood hid his face; his smile had grown too broad. "I am afraid he is rather busy at the moment."

Birdesmond did not pursue the matter. "And so that was when you came to work in the Eternal Dungeon?"

"In the outer dungeon, as a furnace-stoker. My Seeker's behavior had stunned me. I thought to myself that, if his behavior was typical of the other men and women working in the Eternal Dungeon, then this was a place where my parents would have wanted me to work. . . . The dungeon did not turn out to be so ideal a workplace as I had imagined, but it was close enough to my dreams that I was satisfied."

"And you stayed here after that?"

"During my years in the outer dungeon I was permitted to visit the lighted world, but I rarely did so. From the time I arrived here, this seemed to be the right place for me."

"Mm." Birdesmond's eyes wandered away, staring aimlessly at the glass-blocked wall. "And how old were you?"

"Twenty-nine. I took my oath as Seeker five years later."

"That is a young age at which to decide that you want to be imprisoned for the rest of your life."

"Not so young as that; most Seekers take their vows when they are in their early twenties. Besides, there is comfort in knowing that all Seekers have made the same sacrifice – that none of you are worse off than the others."

Birdesmond considered this remark at length before saying, "And you had no ties outside the dungeon, other than the two sisters you did not know well?"

"I had a couple of friends from the manufactory – Seamus and Jock. I was sorry to have to break ties with them, but I made other friends here."

"Among the men and women in the outer dungeon?"

"Among the men," he clarified. "I am afraid those friendships turned out not to be permanent. All of my lasting relationships have been with Seekers."

Birdesmond's gaze wandered, dancing up and down the wall like the flames behind it, until it came to rest on an iron ring set high upon the wall. After a minute, Weldon said, "Mistress Birdesmond?"

"Mr. Chapman." Birdesmond's voice was far away. "You have given me a great deal to think about. I was wondering . . . I know this must be an unusual request, but I was wondering whether we might end our conversation today, so that I could have time to think."

Weldon frowned. "I fear that would not be possible. You see, we are overcrowded with prisoners at the moment, and the High Seeker has asked

that we conclude our searchings quickly—"

"Yes, I am sure." Birdesmond's voice remained distracted. "But you know, I am still new to all this, and I really think it would be best if I give careful thought to what I am to do next. I would not want to make any terrible mistakes that I would regret afterwards."

Weldon opened his mouth, and then closed it. Birdesmond was perfectly right. If he was really going to permit her to search him, then he had to do so properly. That meant she, not he, was the one who must decide the length of the sessions. And after all, he could be sure that she was not lengthening their time together out of sheer perverseness. She wanted to see the High Seeker; she would spend as little time with Weldon as was needed to obtain her true goal.

"Well," he said, rising from his seat, "it is true that I have a great deal of documentwork awaiting me. Perhaps this is the day when I will catch up on my work."

"Or perhaps you may rest," she suggested, rising with her jeweled comb in hand. "You look rather tired, Mr. Chapman. I hope your sleep is untroubled."

"Perfectly," he said tersely. "I will see you tomorrow, Mistress Birdesmond."

She swept him a curtsey; he bowed. Then he walked to the cell door, trying to push back the uneasy feeling that she knew about his dreams.

o—o—o

The common room was different in the dark. Lamps glittered like stars along the walls, while the back portion of the room, usually sunlit during the day, was black but for an occasional candle. Only murmurs could be heard.

Most of the day shift had gone to bed already. The only people still up were a few retired Seekers and a handful of junior Seekers and guards who were still young enough to think they could keep late hours without being weary the next day. Weldon look round the room till he saw a group of three Seekers sitting together. He walked over.

The eldest man at the table was retired; though he still wore his hood, the face-cloth was flung up, as it had not been in public during his working days. He frowned at the chessboard before him. Glancing at the new arrival, he said, "You're up late, Weldon."

"A dream woke me." Weldon looked down at the positions of the chess pieces, willing the elderly man to make the move. Retirement was not a luxury open to all Seekers: only Seekers who were disabled by ill health were permitted it. This particular Seeker – who happened to be the man who had trained Weldon – had acquired a crippling arthritis, due to his long years in the dungeon's damp cave. He had rejected the dungeon healer's recommendation that he be released to the lighted world, saying that he wished to fulfill his oath.

Softly, so as not to disturb the Seeker's train of thought, Weldon asked, "Where's the High Seeker?"

"Elsdon Taylor is on duty – where do you think the High Seeker is? — Check to your King; I'll have him in four moves." With effort, the elderly Seeker picked up his black Queen with his fist and moved her forward one square, in the direction of the white Vovimian King.

His fellow player swore. He was middle-aged, but he too had the face-cloth of his hood pulled up. He said, in a musing manner, "Layle Smith makes the rest of us look like free men by comparison."

The third man at the table, a junior Seeker scribbling documentwork, said, "I wish I could go mad and take a lengthy holiday from my work."

The silence at the table alerted him to trouble. He looked up to see three Seekers glaring at him. "What?" he said weakly. "For love of the Code, I was only making mock!"

"Make mock about a less serious matter," the elderly Seeker growled. "Weldon, you're likely to find the High Seeker awake. I've heard that he spends the night shift doing documentwork."

Weldon shook his head. "I won't disturb him. Good night, all."

The elderly Seeker opened his mouth to give his farewell just as the middle-aged Seeker, with a cry of triumph, picked up one of his guards

and moved it forward to pick off a black Seeker. "Check! I have your Queen in two moves." He scooted his chair back, revealing that one of his legs was cut off at the knee. He had survived his prisoner's attack, but gangrene had set in afterwards.

The elderly Seeker groaned. The junior Seeker, leaning forward, said, "No, wait! He'll have to sacrifice his High Master to do that, so all that you need do is bring forward your High Seeker, and then . . ."

The conversation faded as Weldon moved into the hallway, little more than a dark tunnel, since the lamplighters had not yet renewed this portion of the dungeon. He wondered to himself, as he walked back to his cell, why it was that he had wished to speak to the High Seeker. He was too old to seek out the comfort of another person just because he was plagued by nightmares.

CHAPTER FOUR

Weldon dragged himself wearily to his prisoner's cell the next morning. After three hours spent trying to stave off his dreams, he had finally abandoned sleep and spent the remainder of the night doing documentwork. But this proved to be no more pleasurable an exercise, for his conversation the previous day with Birdesmond had caused his mind to wander, with frightening accuracy, to the worst year of his life: the year he became a guard in the Eternal Dungeon.

Those were the years before the dungeon's Torturers were renamed Seekers. It was still the custom then for guards-in-training to be hazed by more experienced guards. Weldon had accepted this custom, even though it seemed to him that his hazing was of a higher degree than that of the other new guards. He guessed that his special status – as a commoner who had been elevated to the elite – required that he prove himself to a greater degree.

And then the six months of his training ended, and the hazing continued. It was becoming clear to Weldon that the hazing would never end. It was not meant to serve the same purpose as it did with the other new guards, of allowing them the opportunity to show their mettle and to bond with more experienced guards. In his case, the hazing was meant to drive him out of the inner dungeon, back to the commoner world where he belonged.

Stubbornly, he stuck the matter out, refusing to leave, refusing to tattle to the High Torturer about what was happening. If only, he thought to himself, he could last until a Torturer discovered the hazing and put a stop to it.

He had worked in the inner dungeon for nearly a year on the day that they cornered him in an empty cell and demanded that he go down on his knees before each of them, in the manner that a commoner does before the men to whom he owes servitude. Wearily, he did so; he had done this for these men many times before. But then the newest and youngest guard, only three days into training, demanded that Weldon kiss his boot. Amidst the jibes and jeers, Weldon refused.

And so they stripped him of his clothes and tied him to the ring and used their whips on him, each one accompanying his beating with catcalls about

vile commoners. They told him they were doing him a favor – that when he became a Torturer, he'd need to undergo this training in any case. And then they threw his bloodied body onto the floor and ordered him to kiss all their boots, lest they place him on the rack.

Weldon, sobbing his refusals, raised his face from the ground in time to see that the door to the cell had opened a crack. There, unnoticed by the other guards, stood a black-hooded Torturer, his olive-skinned hand tight on the latch.

Another sob escaped Weldon, this one of relief. It was not just any Torturer – it was Mr. Smith, the young Torturer who had defended him in court, the man who was so valued by the High Torturer that he had recently been selected to revise the *Code of Seeking*. If anyone could put a stop to this, Mr. Smith could.

Weldon raised his gaze to the Torturer's eyes. That was a mistake.

For a moment, they were both motionless, gazing upon one another: Weldon unable to move, Mr. Smith looking down at him with eyes smiling with pleasure. Then softly, so softly that the other guards did not notice, the young Torturer closed the door.

That night, after the torment had finally ended, Weldon lay shuddering in his bed, trying to figure out what to do next. He had been wrong about his Torturer, and if he was wrong about Mr. Smith . . .

The next morning Weldon was given a message bidding him to come to the High Torturer's office. Such was Weldon's state of mind that he was convinced that the High Torturer planned to punish him for refusing to kiss the guards' boots. Instead, the High Torturer told him that he was to be trained to become a Torturer, due to a recommendation from one of the Torturers.

That was the day when Weldon learned that Layle Smith made a great distinction between what he enjoyed and what he countenanced.

Weldon tried to keep that distinction in mind as he walked toward Birdesmond's cell. Was his desire to bring a quick end to this searching due only to his selfish desire to end the nightmares and dark memories

that Birdesmond was unwittingly triggering? No, he was sure that was not the case. His motive was to help the prisoners – the other prisoners, who were awaiting his assistance. If Birdesmond had truly committed a crime, he would have spent as lengthy a time with her as was needed, but he was increasingly sure that she was innocent of any crime. So he must put a stop to this.

The question was how.

He found Birdesmond once more next to the fiery wall, this time on her knees, placing her hand against the bottom edge of the wall. She turned her head when he entered and said, "I thought perhaps the wall was hot enough that a prisoner could burn himself on it."

Weldon waited until his senior day guard had closed the door. Then he walked forward to the middle of the cell, saying, "No. The height and temperature of the fires are regulated to prevent that."

"That was foresightful of the Eternal Dungeon."

"It was a reaction to lack of foresight, actually. These furnaces were installed after a prisoner deliberately burned himself to death on one of the stoves that used to heat the prisoners' cells."

Birdesmond was in the midst of trying to disentangle herself from her wide skirt in order to rise. As on the previous day, Weldon had to suppress the impulse to come forward and help her rise. She looked up at him and said quietly, "How very sad. I notice that the cells have watch-holes, which are mentioned in the *Code of Seeking*. Was no guard watching the prisoner at the time this happened?"

"No," said Weldon, "he was not." He felt the familiar weight of guilt press upon him, accompanied by a sharp annoyance that Birdesmond continued to show such talent in bringing the darkest aspects of his past into the present.

"Well," said Birdesmond, finally rising, "I am not very surprised to hear about the death – such things happen in every prison – but I am surprised at the lengths that the Eternal Dungeon has gone to prevent such a death

from occurring again. The Seekers certainly go to much trouble to care for their prisoners."

It was the type of opening he had wanted; he grasped at it eagerly. "This is especially so with female prisoners," he said. "The *Code of Seeking*, as you may have noticed, has special rules on the treatment of female prisoners – for example, women cannot be tortured. And these rules are backed by stricter policies of supervision over the Seekers who search female prisoners. In fact, it is likely that, within the next day or two, either the Codifier or someone he appoints will visit to check that you are being properly tended—"

"And there is a rule against touching? I notice that you have taken great care not to touch me."

He felt exultant. Now, at last, they were in the final paces of the searching; now he could demonstrate clearly to her that her efforts to accuse him of abuse were misguided. "The *Code of Seeking* forbids all Seekers from touching prisoners, whether the prisoners be female or male. That is one of our strictest rules. If one of my guards saw me touch you, in however small a manner, he would be required to report me to the Codifier. That is why guards are under orders to watch the interactions between Seeker and prisoner in an especially close manner if the prisoner is a woman."

Birdesmond nodded. "And the outer dungeon workers. Are you forbidden from touching them as well?"

He was silent a moment, trying to trace mentally her pattern of searching. Then he said, "There is no official rule against it, but it would not be appropriate for a Seeker to do so. We are required to maintain formality at all times with the outer dungeon inhabitants. That is why we wear the face-cloths of our hoods down when we are in public."

"So you have not touched anyone since you became a Seeker."

Suddenly the path of her searching was manifest to him; he felt himself relax accordingly. "I know that the popular image of a Seeker is of a touch-starved man who has been deprived of all human contact and is therefore driven to base lusts with his prisoners," he said, letting amusement enter his voice. "But this is not the case. The custom in the Eternal Dungeon is

to permit friendships between the inhabitants of the inner dungeon, the Seekers and the guards. The Code even permits Seekers to choose love-mates amongst each other, since all Seekers take the oath of eternal confinement."

"And have you done so?"

He could have cursed himself in the next moment. He had braided the noose and slung it over his own neck. No doubt her question was innocent enquiry rather than deliberate entrapment, but it was not a question he wanted to answer.

"That is personal information, Mistress Birdesmond," he said in his most forbidding voice.

"I am very sorry, sir," she said, looking down at the ground. "I know that I am your prisoner and ought not to be questioning you."

She was watching him through her lashes. Weldon remembered, too late, that he had not offered her a seat. It hardly seemed appropriate for him to do so now. It was the Seeker who decided such matters, and Birdesmond – as she had just pointedly reminded him – was taking the role of Seeker in this exchange.

Unless he wanted to turn the rules and take back the power of searching. That would not please Layle, not when Weldon had come so far with this prisoner. Weldon was highly tempted to lie to Birdesmond, but the Code explicitly stated the penalties for lying by male prisoners and— No, Weldon really did not want to test whether Birdesmond would demand that the guards be brought in to beat him.

He decided that it was instead time to teach Birdesmond the most valuable lesson any Seeker-in-Training ever learns: that a blatant lie can fairly easily be detected, but an evasion is far harder to notice.

"Well," he said, "I am a bit shy about discussing my private life, I will admit. I suppose that is because my fortune has been so great. A number of years ago, a Seeker of high reputation, who was my friend, asked me to be his love-mate. I was pleased and honored to accept his proposal."

"I see," said Birdesmond. "And how long did your love-bond last?"

His tongue nearly stumbled, but he recovered himself quickly. "It is an honor I have retained to the present day."

"No doubt," said Birdesmond, sweetly soft. "But I did not ask you whether you had retained your honor; I asked how long you remained love-mates with this man. One year? Ten?"

"Mistress Birdesmond," he said, trying not to sound as desperate as he felt, "I really do not want to be talking about my private life when another person is involved. He might not like my discussing this with you."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Birdesmond. "I quite understand."

She lowered her eyes again, but this time she did not try to hide the steady stare she gave him. She might as well have shouted aloud, "Your refusal to answer tells me all that I need to know."

Weldon found himself hoping that his day guards were not listening to this conversation. His reputation as a Seeker might never recover if others heard about this. He spent a minute confirming for himself that the noose was tightened beyond any ability for him to remove it. Then he said, with a small sigh, "The love-bond lasted less than an hour."

To her credit, she did not laugh. "You decided it would not be wise to proceed with the relationship?"

"The other Seeker made certain statements which showed me clearly that our visions of love were very different and that I should not proceed into the love-bond. I was glad, afterwards, that I learned of our incompatibility so early on, before our ties were fully formed."

"But you were in love with him?"

"I thought I was at the time." Weldon had his gaze narrowed upon her now. He was trying, through what now seemed to him to be a feeble mind, to figure out what connection this conversation had with the female prisoners whom Birdesmond believed he was abusing. "I realized afterwards that I was not. I had thought he was a man I ought to feel passion toward, and so I had persuaded myself that I did. I am not sure whether that makes sense to you."

"Oh, yes," she said with a smile. "It has happened to me as well, and to many people, I think. It is less likely to happen once you have truly fallen in love. And that has happened to you, I suppose?"

"I— Excuse me? I am not sure I understand the question."

"You have fallen in love with other Seekers? You have sought to create other love-bonds? Or at least considered doing so?"

He could feel something hard in his chest, preventing him from taking easy breaths. "Mistress Birdesmond, I am not sure what you are trying to determine."

"Well," she said with an apologetic air, "I suppose I am twisting and turning down a complicated path. You spoke two days ago about how all of the Seekers make the same sacrifice and that none of you are worse off than the others."

"Perhaps I exaggerated. My own sacrifice was lesser than that of many Seekers here, because I was able to spend more time in the lighted world than most Seekers do. Other Seekers are somewhat worse off than me."

"Ah." Her voice had taken on an apologetic tone. "Then I fear I am a bit confused. You see, the *Code of Seeking* makes provision for Seekers who wish to take male love-mates, but it does not seem to provide any solution for men who are only able to feel passion for women."

"And you think—" Weldon had to force the words out. "You think such men as that are more likely to abuse female prisoners?"

"Oh, no, I was not trying to suggest that. Men will assault women for many reasons, and previously denied desires are only one of those reasons. No, what I wanted to suggest is that the Seekers who are unable to feel passion for other men have made a greater sacrifice in vowing to remain here than the Seekers who can feel passion for other men and can therefore choose love-mates amongst each other. Any Seeker who thinks otherwise has deceived himself. And you know," she said softly, "I do think that self-deception is a very great evil. Whether or not it leads a person to commit a crime, it is still a darkness of the soul, and one that ought to be rooted out. With help, if need be. Don't you agree?"

Weldon was staring at the ground now. His heart was beating hard, and it was even more difficult to breathe in this position than it had been before, but he dared not let Birdesmond see the expression written upon his face. "Perhaps," he said in a low voice.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a man ran through darkness, searching desperately.

o—o—o

The High Seeker was silent a while before he said, "She is skilled."

"She is," Weldon agreed.

"But not skilled enough. She has not reached the heart of the matter." He reached over for his drink.

Weldon was silent. Around him he could hear light chatter, somewhat easier in tone than the last time he had visited this common room while the High Seeker was here. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the High Seeker had chosen, for the first time in nine months, to appear in public without Elsdon at his side. It was a good sign, a very good sign.

Weldon wished he could feel more pleasure than he did at the High Seeker's renewed health. Perhaps his weariness of mind came simply from weariness of body. It was past midnight, and while it was normal for the High Seeker to be awake at this hour – he took the night shift – Weldon was usually in bed at this time. He had been awakened again, though, by the dream that had possessed him for many years: a dream in which he ran and ran through the darkness, seeking a door he never found.

Layle flicked a glance at him, and then returned his attention to the cup he was sipping from. Weldon wondered whether the High Seeker knew where that missing door lay. As Layle had subtly indicated, the mystery did not lie with the fact that Weldon was incapable of feeling passion for men. Weldon had known that for many years, since shortly after his abortive attempt to enter into a love-bond with another Seeker. He had grieved over that knowledge, had come to terms with it, and had continued with his life. After all, he was not the only Seeker who could feel passion only for

women and would forever be deprived of entering into love with another person. There were other Seekers here who had made that sacrifice.

That was not where Weldon's pain lay; that was not what made his heart ache whenever he saw Layle and Elsdon together and sensed the depth of their passion for each other. But where his pain lay – what door was missing from his life – he did not know.

Now, for the first time in many years, he was beginning to grow afraid that someone else would learn the truth before he did.

"Mr. Chapman," Layle said softly, "if you would prefer, I can have the Record-keeper transfer Mistress Birdesmond to another Seeker."

For a moment he was tempted. Then he remembered his oath and said, "That would not be in the best interests of the prisoner, sir. Matters are proceeding well between the two of us: she has already made the error of thinking she has discovered the full truth about me, and I suspect that she has reached the limits of her ability."

"No doubt." The certainty in Layle's voice was reassuring. "I have met others like her. They have a certain inborn talent for being able to ferret out other people's secrets, and they think that is enough to enable them to become Seekers. But there is a great deal more to being a Seeker than simply breaking a prisoner." He lifted his gaze to Weldon. "In permitting Mistress Birdesmond to search you, I am placing you at some risk. Perhaps undue risk."

"Seekers are always at risk with their prisoners," Weldon responded promptly.

Layle held Weldon's gaze for a moment, and then let his eyes wander away, not replying. Weldon, following his gaze, saw that Layle's senior night guard was sitting at the table where Elsdon had sat on Layle's previous visits here. He was absorbed in conversation with another guard.

Weldon wondered how Layle felt at being shadowed. He doubted that the guard was here by Layle's order; no doubt the Codifier had asked the guard to keep his eye on the situation. It was not the first time this had happened,

but it must be galling to Layle, who had finally found the strength to give up his chaperone, to know that he was not yet fully trusted.

Or perhaps he found it a comfort. Weldon wished he knew the High Seeker better than he did.

In his usual uncanny manner of following up on other people's unspoken thoughts, Layle said, "I am sorry that the prisoner chose to search you on so sensitive a matter from your past."

Weldon, sitting on the edge of his seat, did his best to look relaxed and unconcerned. "It has been many years, sir. I long ago realized that what happened was for the best." In fact, it had not been so long ago that he had reached this realization, but that was a matter best not spoken of. He said, more hesitantly, "My only regret is, not that I refused to enter into such a bond, but that I expressed my refusal in so hurtful a manner – a manner that prevented our other, more suitable relationship from continuing."

Layle's gaze wandered back toward the scattering of men in the room. "As you say, that was many years ago. The past is past."

"Sir, I—"

"Do you have any more questions about your work with the prisoner, Mr. Chapman?"

Layle had picked up his pen again; it was hovering over his documentwork, a pointed reminder that he was on duty at this moment. Weldon swallowed and said in a low voice, "No, sir."

Layle nodded and began to scribble a signature at the bottom of the page he had been reading. Weldon got up carefully, abandoning his mug on the table that had separated him from the High Seeker.

He reached the doorway just as a silence fell upon the inhabitants of the common room. Raising his eyes from the ground, Weldon saw that Elsdon, who should have been on duty at this time of night, was standing there, surveying the crowd. He greeted Weldon in a friendly manner, but his words seemed forced.

"Is something wrong?" Weldon spoke low. Behind him, the chatter had resumed in a somewhat strained manner.

Elsdon shook his head. "Not the sort of trouble this lot is thinking of. I didn't come to see whether the High Seeker has wreaked havoc in my absence; the Record-keeper asked me to fetch Layle for a conference. A half dozen more prisoners have arrived tonight – we're about to run out of cells to house new prisoners."

"Sweet blood," Weldon swore softly. Cursing was a habit he had acquired with difficulty, having been taught by his parents to keep his thoughts and mouth pure, but he had found that voicing a select few curses commonly spoken by the high-born of Yclau was a small way in which he could bind himself with the other inhabitants of the inner dungeon.

"I'd better break my prisoner today, then, so that I can clear her cell for another prisoner's use," Weldon said. "It will be a pleasure to be through with her."

He started to step past Elsdon, but the junior Seeker grabbed his elbow. Their eyes met, and Weldon remembered, too late, that Elsdon shared Layle's talent for being able to sense when a prisoner was in turmoil.

Weldon sighed and looked back at the High Seeker. Layle was pretending he did not see Elsdon standing at the doorway. Perhaps that was only because Weldon was standing at the doorway too. Layle's night guard was frowning, as though he sensed that Layle's equilibrium had been adversely affected during the past few minutes.

"What has happened?" Elsdon's voice was soft.

Weldon shook his head, looking back at the junior Seeker. "Stupidity on my part. I brought up the subject of our pasts."

Compassion lay in Elsdon's eyes. "It isn't just you, Weldon. He has been pushing everyone back since this began."

"Not you."

"Yes, me as well. We're – divided in a way that we weren't before."

Weldon managed to stop himself in time from pointing out that Elsdon at least had the comfort of knowing he had once been intimate with Layle. Weldon had struggled hard to kill his jealousy for Elsdon; he would not allow himself to return to that state. He knew, to his very bones, that he would not have been happy as Layle's love-mate and could not have given the High Seeker what Elsdon was giving him.

And yet still, when he saw Layle and Elsdon together, he felt pain, as though somehow they held a secret he was searching for.

A missing door?

"I must go," Weldon murmured. "I'm on duty in four hours."

Elsdon nodded and released Weldon, who began to make his way down the empty hallway leading back to the inner dungeon. His sleeping cell awaited him; he hoped he would have no more nightmares tonight. Or in the morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

He found her staring at the fiery wall again, but she did not turn when he entered. She said abruptly, "The first line in the *Code of Seeking* is, 'A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners.'"

"Yes," he agreed. "That line is also in the oath all Seekers take."

"The words seem odd to me," Birdesmond said. "It is the prisoners who suffer most, not the Seekers. It is the prisoners who must be broken, and perhaps tortured and sent to their deaths. How dare the Seekers think of their own pain when they give such great pain to others?"

Weldon scrutinized the back of her head. It was tilted as she looked up at the iron ring from which tortured prisoners were bound, and he felt a pang of sympathy for her. She was quicker than him. He had been a full three months into his training as a Seeker before he had realized the extent of the power he held over prisoners, and what the consequences of that power must be.

But then, she had already used her skills to send a man to prison. Perhaps this had been on her mind all this time, and she had simply been waiting to find someone to whom she could ask the question.

So he answered her, saying, "The pain we feel is almost never as great as the pain of the prisoners. We do our best to lessen the difference between ourselves and the prisoners; we imprison ourselves in this dungeon and we undergo training that requires us to feel much of the same pain as we may inflict on our prisoners. But even so, our pain can rarely match that of our prisoners, because what hurts them most is the unknown – the uncertainty as to whether their breaking will destroy their futures."

"Perhaps," she suggested in a low voice, "no one has the right to inflict such pain upon another person."

It would be easy, oh so easy, to let this be the end of the conversation. All he need do was agree, or perhaps remain silent, and she would be left without any justification for what she was doing to him and wished to do to others. He could end her journey now.

But the answer was there, in the very words she had spoken. He guessed that the answer would come to her late some night, even if he did not supply her with it. So he said, "We do not vow to suffer as much as the prisoners. All we vow is to be *willing* to suffer for them. If our duty requires us to undergo pain for the prisoners, or even to die, then we must embrace our suffering willingly. We must be prepared at any moment to give all that we have to help transform the prisoner."

She turned then; her face was clear, and there was a firmness in her eyes that disturbed him. She said, in a voice as gentle as though she had been the one offering the comfort, "It is easier for the Seeker, though, if the prisoner recognizes the need for his own pain, and accepts it."

"It is much easier," he agreed, and waited.

Her gaze travelled over him, and he wondered what she was seeing. He had often looked at himself in the mirror when he was younger and had decided long ago that he was the stereotype of what a commoner should look like: stocky, rough-haired, coarse in looks, with no grace in his bodily movements. He did not place much concern in this. As a Seeker, he knew that ugliness of the body might be matched by beauty of the soul, and he must have enough of that beauty to have drawn the High Seeker's heart to him. But that was many years ago, at a time when Layle was willing to be his friend. The past was past.

"I was thinking overnight of what we discussed," Birdesmond said in a clear voice. "It occurred to me that there must be a number of men in this dungeon who are unable to feel passion for men – is that not so? Perhaps you know some of them?"

He could have laughed. It was the most elementary device a Seeker could use to comfort his prisoner: to allow him the opportunity to create an imaginary friend until such time as the prisoner was ready to admit that his friend's troubles were his own.

"I do," he agreed. "One of my friends is in that situation."

Birdesmond nodded. She was not fiddling with her gloves today; her hands were relaxed at her sides. "It occurred to me also that different men might have come here for different reasons. I am sure, of course, that all of the

Seekers and guards here wish to help the prisoners. But perhaps some of the men here – perhaps a very few – came here in an effort to hide from knowledge about themselves."

Weldon felt himself relax; it seemed that Birdesmond was going to continue exploring what was old territory to him. "You mean my friend might have come here because he was nervous around women and sought to live in a place where he would not have to undergo the trials of courting women? Yes, I think that has occurred to him."

Birdesmond looked at him steadily. "So your friend is nervous with women?"

"I think so. At any rate, he has been able to reconcile himself to the fact that he will never marry."

"And so your friend who is nervous around women makes all effort to avoid the company of women in the Eternal Dungeon?"

Her soft words hit him like a blow. His mind staggered, and he sought to maintain his balance. "He – he has worked somewhat with women since his arrival here."

"Somewhat, or a great deal?"

"No one in the inner dungeon works a great deal with women," he said quickly.

"But he has worked with women more than the other guards and Seekers do."

Silence. Then: "The decision whether to work with women is not entirely his own. He is given his work assignments by the Record-keeper, who often consults with the High Seeker—"

"But he could refuse to work with women, if he wished to? He could ask for other assignments?"

Another silence. Then, stiffly: "I am not sure what you are suggesting."

Birdesmond smoothed down her skirt before saying, "It seems to me that, if your friend is so comfortable around women that he is willing to work

with them more often than other Seekers do, then the trouble he believes he escaped by coming here cannot have been simply a nervousness around women. Perhaps the trouble was something greater than that."

His mouth was dry. He swallowed. "What sort of trouble?"

She did not answer at once. Her gaze wandered away from him, exploring the smooth stones of the cell, the metal door behind him, the well-swept flagstones, and finally the hard sleeping-bench provided for prisoners. "Your friend – has he fallen in love with anyone since he came here? Has he felt passion of body and heart toward anyone?"

"He thought he did once," said Weldon, adding swiftly, "but that was toward a man. He has discovered since that time that he cannot feel passion toward men."

"But he has not fallen in love?"

"No. He lives in the Eternal Dungeon. He cannot mate himself with another man—"

"Yet you say he works with women."

A third silence. Weldon could feel the blood surging through his veins as his heart hammered within him. His skin had turned hot. He said, "The women he works with . . . they are prisoners. It would be inappropriate for him to fall in love with a prisoner."

"Certainly it would be inappropriate for any prison worker to establish bonds of love with a prisoner, but I do not recall that the *Code of Seeking* is so foolish as to forbid the Seekers and guards from involuntary responses, such as falling in love with prisoners. Surely that is not uncommon? It happens quite a lot at Parkside Prison."

His breath was starting to rasp; he tried to steady it. "It depends on the Seeker or guard. Some men are better than others at controlling their responses—"

"Oh?" Birdesmond raised a delicate eyebrow. "So the well-controlled Seekers never fall in love?"

Involuntarily, Weldon's mind leapt to an image of Elsdon kneeling beside Layle. Elsdon, Layle's former prisoner. Weldon was not so foolish as to think that Layle's love of the young man had begun only after Elsdon ceased to be his prisoner.

"I am not sure . . ." His voice faltered, and he tried again. "I am still not sure what you are trying to say."

"Well, your friend's situation seems odd to me. You say that he can fall in love with women, can feel passion for them, and yet, after all these years of working with female prisoners, he has not felt passion for a single one of them. Is it possible, Mr. Chapman, that, if your friend had remained in the lighted world, he would have failed to feel passion for any of the women he courted?"

Breathing now seemed an exercise that took more effort than it was worth. He stared at Birdesmond blankly, as though he were in darkness and could see nothing before him. No path, no door – never any door. It was not beyond his view; it simply did not exist. It had never existed.

"I cannot love," he whispered.

"What did you say, Mr. Chapman?"

He stared at her, dimly seeing the soft contours of her face. She was beautiful, she was attractive in both body and soul. And he felt nothing. Nothing.

"He cannot love," he said hoarsely. "My friend . . . He is incapable of love. He – he is misshapen, he has a crippled soul. Something must have gone wrong when he was reborn into his new life. Here in the Eternal Dungeon, where some men are celibate, he can hide his deformity more easily. But he is twisted, down to his very heart."

Birdesmond responded by frowning. She glared at him, as she might have glared at an ugly slug that had slid its way onto her path. She looked thoroughly disgusted. "Really, Mr. Chapman," she said. "I might remind you that you are a commoner."

It was a blow he was not prepared for. He turned his head, as though she had doubled a whip and struck it against his cheek. He remembered Layle

saying, "I am placing you at some risk." He ought to have heeded those words.

He had seen it many times in his work, what happened to a prisoner at this point in the searching. The prisoner's terrible vulnerability, as though he had been stripped of all skin, so that any blow taken would be a death blow to his soul. It took skill – oh, so much skill – not to harm the prisoner in those moments. This was particularly the case when the prisoner had revealed himself, through his confession, to be a vile person, one who could be worthily scorned. It took all the skill of a Seeker to keep from scorning such a prisoner, to keep from harming him beyond repair.

And Mistress Birdesmond was not a Seeker. He ought to have remembered that. He had taken the most dangerous step in the world: he had allowed someone who was not a Seeker the opportunity to search him.

He was shaking now, thinking of her look and her words, thinking of the contempt he had endured when he first came to work in the inner dungeon. He had survived such contempt because he had convinced himself that it was unjustified. He was not a vile man. He was not "common" in the true sense of the word.

Only he was. However unjustified the high-born might be in scorning other commoners, the scorn had been justified in his case. He was a man incapable of love, a man who was not truly human. He had hidden that knowledge from himself and from others, but now it was clear to him. He had felt no stirring of the heart toward Layle, not only because he was unable to feel love toward men, but because he was unable to feel love toward anyone.

And Birdesmond knew this and scorned him for it. Sweet blood; sweet, sweet blood. If he could only get away from here – if he could only find a way to escape—

He remembered then the prisoner in the crematorium, whose candle he lit every few months. He closed his eyes. No – no, he would not do that. However much he deserved it, he would not do that to himself. Layle would never be able to bear it if he did.

The thought of the High Seeker brought unexpected comfort to Weldon. Layle too was a man who had committed vile deeds in his life, and he had found a way beyond that. Somehow, Weldon would do the same. He opened his eyes and said steadily to Birdesmond, "The fact that I am a commoner is irrelevant to my friend's condition. Other commoners are capable of love; my own parents were very much in love with one another."

Birdesmond looked puzzled. Then, for a moment, a stricken expression passed over her face. It was quickly gone, and she said calmly, "I apologize, Mr. Chapman; I expressed myself badly. I did not mean to imply that I was using the word 'commoner' as an insult. I was trying to point out that commoners are often wiser in matters of love than are the high-born."

He made no reply; it was too much of an effort to do so. He dared not let himself hope that he was anything more in her eyes than a slug.

"You spoke just now of love, and then you said that your parents were *in* love, as though the two were the same. Do you really equate love with passion?"

"Of course not," he said automatically. "It all depends on what sort of relationship is sought. Two friends can love each other without passion, or a parent can love a child—" He stopped, a glimmer of hope beginning to rise in him. It was too small to penetrate the darkness within him.

"Only friends? Are you saying that, if a man and a woman wish to share their life together, they must feel passion for one another?"

He frowned, uncertain of where she was leading him now. She sighed and said, "Mr. Chapman, I told you I had many suitors. They came to me and told me that they loved me to the depths of their being, that they would love me through a thousand lifetimes, that their love was as endless as the monarchy. And then, when they learned that I wished to be a prison worker, somehow their endless love disappeared and they abandoned me. After this had happened a dozen times or more, it occurred to me to ask a suitor what he meant when he said that he loved me. It turned out that what he meant by 'love' was a stirring here" – she held her hand over her heart – "and here." She lowered her hand slightly.

Weldon felt himself blush. Noticing this, Birdesmond smiled and said, "Such stirrings are indeed exciting; I have felt them myself. They hold possibilities for binding two people together. But in order to stay bound . . . I asked my family and friends what they thought love was, and they all defined it the way my suitors did, as a feeling of passion. Then it occurred to me to ask the families I spent time with at the prison."

"You received a different answer?" he blurted out. He was trying, desperately, to remember now what it was that he seen in his parents' relationship with one another that had made him desire so greatly to find a life-mate – the bond he had sensed between Layle and Elsdon, which had made his heart ache with longing again. Surely it had been passion?

"The high-born can afford such luxuries as marrying for passion," Birdesmond said. "After all, if their passion dies, they can simply divorce. But people living in poverty cannot afford that luxury. They cannot hire a nurse for their children if they send away their wife, and they cannot persuade someone to earn bread for their children's mouths if they send away their husband. They must pick their life-mates more carefully. And so, when I asked the young women and youths in the prison waiting-room how they chose their husbands and wives, their answers were down-to-earth. While they enjoyed being in love, they picked their partners on the basis of which people would be likely to stay with them and live the type of life they wished to live. They sought people they could join their fortunes with, whom they could care for and be cared for by, and who would be willing to help them raise a family. This was the foundation of their marriages, and I have no doubt, Mr. Chapman, that if your parents' marriage was as successful as you say, that this was the foundation for them as well."

Weldon stared at the far wall of the cell blankly, watching the flames leap and fall. Finally he said slowly, "I think . . . I think it is not only that way with commoners. I know two Seekers . . . If you asked them, no doubt they would say that they were drawn to one another through passion. Yet one of the Seekers has been gravely ill, and caring for him has been a great burden on the other Seeker. I do not think the second Seeker would have remained with the first Seeker through all this time of illness unless they were bound together through something more than passion."

Birdesmond said nothing. After a while, Weldon tore his gaze away from the light. Flames continued to dance before his eyes, but his vision was dark once more. "This knowledge comes too late," he said hoarsely. "If I—If my friend indeed took employment in the inner dungeon partly because he believed himself incapable of love and because he sought a place where he could hide this knowledge from himself and others . . . If that is true, it is too late. He cannot leave here. It is still women he is drawn to, even if in a passionless manner, and he cannot join himself with a commoner woman who would be willing to enter into such a marriage as you describe. That door is lost to him; it is somewhere long behind him."

"I had guessed as much," Birdesmond said softly. "And so you see, your friend has deceived himself twice: once by thinking he was incapable of love, and twice by thinking he could find happiness in this place. All he can find here is the pain of knowing that he has left behind the place where he might have found his own kind of love."

The darkness was silent. Weldon felt his legs tremble, as a man's legs might tremble if he has been running for a long time and is now about to collapse in exhaustion. He could not speak.

Birdesmond asked softly, "Do you wish to stop the searching?"

"Yes," he whispered.

The darkness did not speak.

o—o—o

"Yes, Mr. Chapman." The High Seeker's gaze remained fixed upon the document whose margins he was scribbling in. "How are matters going with your prisoner?"

"Quite well, sir. She has succeeded in breaking me."

Layle's pen stopped in its path abruptly. After a moment, the High Seeker slowly raised his head to look up at Weldon. Dawn was just beginning to touch the crystalline ceiling above them; the strongest light in the room came from the lamp on the table between them, which cast deep shadows over the holes in Layle's hood, hiding the expression in his eyes.

After a moment, he said, "You had better sit down and tell me."

Weldon did so, grateful to be off his feet. Even though he had forced himself to take a night's rest before reporting, he still felt shaky.

The room, which was normally crowded at dawn with men preparing for the day shift and other men returning from the night shift, was deserted but for Layle's senior night guard. He had glanced briefly at Weldon when the Seeker entered, and then had returned to napping upon a table with his head cradled in his arms. Weldon was not surprised. He had left Birdesmond's cell the previous day to find a group of Seekers and guards crowded around the notice-board in the dungeon's entry hall. Signed by the High Seeker, a notice there informed the inner dungeon workers that, for the near future, all senior Seekers would be required to search two prisoners at a time, taking two eight-hour shifts each day rather than their normal twelve-hour shift. Senior guards would follow the same schedule. All junior Seekers and junior guards would be required to work through their usual dawn and dusk leisure hours, in order to care for the documentwork that the senior members of the inner dungeon would be too busy to do.

Ignoring the Record-keeper – who was trying to catch his eye in order to assign him a second prisoner – Weldon had left the entry hall, his ear alert for any complaints that the High Seeker was not doing his fair share of the work. No complaints could be heard. Either the inner dungeon workers recognized how difficult it was for Layle Smith to let others do his work, or everyone still feared the consequences if Layle came near a prisoner.

Now, Weldon supposed, all of the inner dungeon workers must either be working or lying exhausted in their beds. He wished he could join the latter group; he wished he could stay huddled in his cell until he had ridden out the worst of this.

He managed to give his report in a reasonably calm manner, and if the High Seeker noticed that his report on the final moments of the searching was somewhat lacking in detail, he said nothing. No doubt, Weldon thought, looking at the darkness hiding Layle's eyes, the High Seeker had guessed all of this long ago. Perhaps it had played a role in the High Seeker's decision not to renew his friendship with Weldon.

He forced himself to turn aside from such thoughts. What mattered now was the prisoner.

Layle had been sitting very still since the end of the report, as though he too were absorbing the impact of a great blow. Then he raised his finger. Weldon caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to see that Layle's night guard had approached them.

"Mr. Sobel," said Layle in a quiet voice that barely brushed over them, "I would appreciate it if you would go to Mr. Taylor and ask him, when he has finished his shift, to meet me at the Codifier's office."

The guard nodded and flicked a brief glance over at Weldon, like a night guard who is relinquishing to a day guard the duty of watching over a prisoner. Weldon said to Layle as his guard left, "You will ask the Codifier's permission to visit my prisoner?"

"It appears I must." Layle rose slowly to his feet, far slower than he usually moved. He looked round the common room, as though examining it for the last time.

Weldon said, his voice beginning to break, "I am sorry I failed you, sir."

Layle turned his head. The room was still too dark to show the expression in his eyes, but his voice was calm as he said, "You have not failed me, Mr. Chapman. Not in the least."

Weldon was still trying to make sense of this remark when Layle, scooping up the documents from the table, paused in his movement and said, "Mr. Chapman, I am sorry that this has proved to be so difficult a duty for you. If you should need to discuss with a friend what took place between you and Mistress Birdesmond . . ."

"Yes?" Weldon was suddenly finding it difficult to breathe again. He wished that the candlelight would show what lay within the High Seeker's eye-holes.

"Mr. Taylor is a good person to talk to." And with those words, Layle turned his head away and began to walk toward the door.

Weldon let out his breath slowly, feeling the familiar chill of disappointment cover his skin. Then he gave himself a small shake, reminding himself again that what he felt was not important. What mattered was the prisoner, and prisoner was now, unawares, about to enter into her greatest danger.

He hurried to catch up with the High Seeker.

CHAPTER SIX

"You have taken a great deal of trouble to obtain the opportunity to speak with me, Mistress Birdesmond. I do not appreciate attempts to manipulate my Seekers."

Layle's voice was soft; Weldon wondered whether Birdesmond knew enough to be wary. If she was afraid, she did not show it. On Weldon's prior order, she had backed up to the far end of the cell, but she was staring unblinking at the hooded figure at the doorway. Staring at two hooded figures, for Elsdon, also with his face-cloth down, was standing beside the High Seeker. The junior Seeker's eyes were turned toward Layle, who was framed by the open doorway and by the two guards in the corridor.

Weldon forced himself to look back at the prisoner in his charge. With her head lifted high and in a clear voice, Birdesmond responded, "Sir, I have had no intention of manipulating Mr. Chapman."

The High Seeker said nothing. Weldon guessed that he must be raising his eyebrows. After a moment, Birdesmond said in a quieter voice, "Mr. Chapman seemed troubled when we spoke. Naturally, I wanted to help him in any way I could."

"Because you like him, or from a feeling of duty?" Layle's reply was as quick and cutting as a well-swung ax.

"I do not see that those two motives contradict each other." Birdesmond's voice remained calm.

"There is a great deal of difference between private desire and public duty, Mistress Birdesmond. If you do not know that, then you are not a Seeker." Layle's voice was dark with condescension. Weldon wondered whether Birdesmond would recognize how many of the High Seeker's biting responses were play-acting.

Though it was always hard to tell with Layle. His play was his pleasure.

Birdesmond did not blink. "No," she agreed. "I am not a Seeker. The opportunity to receive a Seeker's training has been denied me."

There was a pause. Stealing a glance at Layle, Weldon noticed that his eyes were shifted away from Birdesmond. This in itself was not unusual – the High Seeker was inclined to look away from prisoners periodically, for reasons Weldon had long since guessed. Even so, the sight increased Weldon's uneasiness.

"You committed no crime." The High Seeker's voice was flat. "You lied – you wasted my Seeker's time – in an effort to overrule the decision I gave you."

"I assure you, sir, I have committed a crime."

"Oh?" The High Seeker's voice was once more dark. "And do you think that prisons and dungeons hire criminals?"

It was a question, not a statement. The High Seeker had always been skilled at misleading prisoners without breaking the Code's rule against lying. But the falsehood of the statement that Layle was implying – not to mention its hypocrisy – was so strong that Weldon found himself biting down on his tongue. He glanced over at Birdesmond. He had not thought it was possible for her skin to grow any paler, but the ivory had turned to snow white.

"Well?" Layle's tone was light. "Either you committed a crime, or you lied about a crime – neither of these acts furthers your application, I assure you. Which of these ill deeds did you perpetrate?"

"I committed a crime." Birdesmond's voice was low now; her hands had formed into fists.

"Mistress Birdesmond," Layle said, quite softly, "do not lie to me further. It is not wise."

"I'm not lying!" Birdesmond's voice rose. "When I told others I had applied to become a Seeker, my parents threatened to lock me in my room till I came to my senses, my fiancé broke our engagement, and my friends discussed among themselves whether I should be sent to a home for mental healing. If my desire to be a Seeker isn't a terrible crime, then tell me what I have done to be treated such!"

Tears were running down her face now, hot water on a face as pale as ice. Weldon sucked in his breath, and then closed his mouth.

Even Layle seemed to take his time in responding. Finally he said without emotion, "Mistress Birdesmond, I am sorry if you have been treated ill by your family and friends, but—"

"No." Mistress Birdesmond had removed a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and was wiping the tears away with what appeared to be angry strokes. "I apologize, sir," she said, looking up. "I did not mean to give way like that. My troubles are of no importance; I would not have you train me out of pity. What matters is that I believe I have abilities that can help the prisoners here."

Layle ran his right thumb along a space just above the palm of his hand. It looked as though he were stroking an invisible blade. After a moment, he said, "The Codifier and I discussed your application at the time it first arrived. We agreed that, while you appeared to have some of the qualities we value in Seekers, we had no evidence that you possess the quality we desire most in Seekers."

Weldon held his breath, waiting to see whether Birdesmond would make the fatal error of promising to acquire this quality. Instead she said, "I am sorry to hear that, sir. May I ask whether the missing quality is being male?"

"That factor entered into our decision, certainly. We believe that a female Seeker would cause . . . difficulties for the other Seekers."

"But surely, sir," Birdesmond said in a voice once more calm, "what matters is not the Seekers' welfare but the prisoners'."

Elsdon, still watching Layle with unwavering gaze, curled his fingers in a gesture known only to Seekers and guards. It was the equivalent of a thumbs-up. Weldon felt a smile touch his face briefly under his hood.

"Our prisoners might feel somewhat uncomfortable also if required to take orders from a lady." There was no sign from Layle's voice or body whether he noticed the step forward that had just been taken.

Birdesmond sighed as she pocketed the wet handkerchief and placed her hands behind her back, like a schoolgirl beginning a recital. "Sir, I do not see that it is any worse for a woman to work with male prisoners than it is for a man to work with female prisoners. But if you dislike that thought, then assign me only to your female prisoners. I would not want to hazard any guesses on the conduct of your Seekers, but I know that, in the lesser prisons, the rape of female prisoners is a constant danger. I could save your female prisoners from that."

Weldon realized after a moment that he had ceased to breathe. He let go of his breath slowly, not daring to look toward the High Seeker now.

Layle said imperturbably, "Perhaps. But despite your unwillingness to take into account the Seekers' feelings, they must be taken into account. Your presence here could disturb the Seekers—"

"All of the Seekers, sir, or just you?"

Weldon's gaze snapped over to Layle. The High Seeker, staring fixedly at a spot just to the left of the prisoner, said, "I see no reason why this should be treated as a personal issue."

"But it *is* a personal issue, is it not, Mr. Smith? Since walking into this cell, you have not looked me straight in the eye, and while I do not know your normal routine here, I suspect that it is unusual for any Seeker to enter a cell accompanied by two other Seekers, with his guards standing in the open doorway behind, their hands on their daggers. What makes you fear me, sir, and what makes the others here fearful of your presence?"

The room was utterly still. Layle's guards, who were indeed touching their daggers, looked uneasy. Layle did not turn to look at them. After a moment, he said something soft that did not carry to Weldon's end of the cell. Layle's senior night guard promptly closed the door, staying outside – with his eye pressed to the watch-hole, no doubt. Weldon guessed that Layle had given the order, not to keep the guards out, but to ensure that no one else in the dungeon heard this part of the conversation.

The High Seeker's gaze travelled, ever so slowly, until it met Birdesmond's eyes. All that Weldon could see from this distance was that Layle's eyes

were dark within the holes of his hood. Then Layle said, in a deeper voice than before, "Nine years ago, I sexually assaulted a female prisoner."

Weldon switched his gaze back to Birdesmond in time to see her suck in her breath. But there was no expression of shock on her face, nor any sign of fear. "I am sorry," she said quietly. "It was generous of you to agree to this interview."

Layle nodded in acknowledgment of her remark. "I was generously dealt with at the time by those who decided my fate," he said. "As you can see, I was permitted to continue in my work, since it was believed that I could show greater control over myself with male prisoners than I had with my female prisoner. Female prisoners had long been a particular problem for me. Therefore, one of the conditions placed upon me for my continued employment was that I have no future contact with female prisoners, except with the Codifier's special permission. I fear that a female Seeker would cause . . . difficulties for me, Mistress Birdesmond."

"I fail to understand." Mistress Birdesmond's voice was firm. "Nothing about my presence requires you to visit female prisoners after today, sir. Surely you cannot mean that you are unable to bear the presence of all women – you have hundreds of women working for you in this dungeon."

"In the outer dungeon," Layle amended. "I do not visit the public portions of the outer dungeon, except when accompanied by my guards or by my fellow Seekers."

"Mr. Chapman," Birdesmond said, turning to Weldon, "am I mistaken, or did you not say that cleaning women work in the inner dungeon?"

Weldon confined himself to a nod. He had given up all attempts to keep his eye fixed upon Birdesmond; his gaze kept wandering back to the High Seeker.

Layle said, "This is true. But none of the outer dungeon women who are employed to clean the inner dungeon have ever been a prisoner. I am afraid" – his voice grew softer – "that makes a great deal of difference to me."

This time Weldon did not look at Birdesmond only because he could not bear to. After a minute, Birdesmond said quietly, "So you can work with women, but only if they have never been a prisoner here. And I thought I was being so clever in arranging this way to see you. Instead I was disqualifying myself completely from any hope of becoming a Seeker, wasn't I?"

"Madam, I very much regret that I must impose this rule on myself and the dungeon." For the first time, something close to an emotion entered into Layle's voice. "There have been times when I have been tempted to lay it aside and to permit the employment of former female prisoners in the inner dungeon. But recent events have impressed upon me that my own health is intimately linked with the health of the Eternal Dungeon, and my mind's health requires—"

"You need not speak further, sir." Birdesmond's voice was suddenly strong again. "If you were to assault a fellow Seeker, the Eternal Dungeon – and the prisoners – would lose your talents. I must admit to great disappointment at learning the consequences of my error, but that is of no matter. What matters is the prisoners' welfare, not my own."

All was silent for a minute. No one moved or spoke – not the four persons in the room, nor the guards outside, who had been shifting in place a moment before. It was as though the cell had been suspended out of time, as the dead are suspended before their transformation into a new life.

"I am glad to hear that you feel that way," Layle said, taking a step back. His voice was cool and polite. "Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon was already rapping on the door; it was opened promptly by the High Seeker's senior night guard. Layle swept out of the room. Elsdon paused only long enough to exchange a look with Weldon; then he stepped over the threshold, allowing the guards to close the door behind him.

Birdesmond loosed her breath in one great, long sigh, as though she had been holding it through the entire interview. Weldon did not imitate her; his heart was pounding too hard to permit any loss of breath. "Well," he said, to gain time, "what will you do now?"

Birdesmond took out her crumpled handkerchief, refolded it, and placed it back in her pocket before saying, "Emigrate."

"Emigrate!"

Birdesmond nodded. "I had already decided on that path if the High Seeker denied me again. There are other countries in the world where the *Code of Seeking* is used, albeit in a form that seems to me to be inferior to that of the Eternal Dungeon. I will apply to those other dungeons for work."

"But to leave your native land . . . Could you not be content with returning to Parkside Prison?"

"No," Birdesmond said simply. "I could not."

She turned to look at Weldon. In the flickering light from the fire behind the stones, Weldon could see that her eyelashes were covered with sparkling wetness, and he suspected that this was not due to the earlier tears. He said in an awkward manner, "Mistress Birdesmond, I would like to thank you for the help you have given to my—" He stopped; then, abandoning all pretense, he said, "The help you have given me."

"What will you do?" Birdesmond asked quietly.

He took a deep breath. "What I have done. Continue to work as a Seeker."

"Despite the fact that your imprisonment here brings you deep pain?"

"I have taken an oath to help the prisoners. I think you will understand . . ." He let his voice trail off, willing her to make the proper reply.

"A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners," she said softly. "Yes. Even endless pain is worth it, to fulfill those words."

Weldon said nothing. His ear was straining to hear the conversation taking place in the corridor, but the words outside had stopped. He was not surprised when, a moment later, the door opened, and Layle and Elsdon stepped inside once more.

Birdesmond turned swiftly, her eyes widening and her hand going to her heart. It was an utterly feminine gesture, and Weldon cast a worried look at Layle.

If Layle was affected by the sight before him, he gave no sign. "Mistress Birdesmond," he said, "the final decision is not mine, but I wish you to know that I plan to recommend to the Codifier and the Queen that you be accepted for training as a Seeker – under one condition."

"Sir?" Birdesmond had turned pale again; her voice was breathless.

"In the past, the Codifier has asked Mr. Taylor to serve as my chaperone when I felt need of his presence. I will ask that Mr. Taylor be assigned this duty again, and I will require, madam, that if you see me anywhere in the dungeon without my chaperone, you immediately call this fact to the attention of a guard. Under no circumstances are you to approach me if I am without escort. Are you willing to abide by this condition, until such time as I feel able to ask the Codifier to release me of my chaperone?"

Birdesmond gave a shaky laugh. "Sir, if I saw you stalking toward me without anyone to restrain you, I would scream down the dungeon. But your health—"

"Is a matter of grave concern to me and to others in this dungeon. However, I am equally concerned at finding qualified Seekers for the Eternal Dungeon. We are so short of Seekers at the moment that I cannot afford to turn aside a candidate who has proven herself to possess the quality we desire most in a Seeker."

"And that quality is . . . ?"

"You are willing to suffer for the prisoners."

Layle's voice was soft. He held Birdesmond's gaze for a long moment as Birdesmond's mouth opened, no doubt to make further protests about the High Seeker's health. Then Layle's eyes turned as hard as a heavy lash, and Birdesmond shut her mouth abruptly. Weldon was glad to see that she had sense enough to know when she was defeated.

Layle switched his gaze to Weldon. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Chapman. I would appreciate it if you would arrange for Mistress Birdesmond's release and see that she is placed in the guest apartment while she awaits the final decision." He nodded his farewell to Birdesmond, then turned and left the cell, followed by Elsdon.

As the cell door shut, Weldon found he was cursing himself inwardly.

Sweet blood, would he never learn? "Thank you for your assistance" indeed. Every word that had been spoken in this cell since the High Seeker's entrance, Weldon now realized, had been planned by Layle Smith. The High Seeker had suspected, from Weldon's testimony, that Birdesmond was qualified to be a Seeker, and he had arranged this conversation in such a manner that Birdesmond would be forced to indicate whether his suspicions were true. Even his confession about the assault, Weldon realized, had been planned.

You have not failed me, Mr. Chapman. The words echoed in Weldon's head. Perhaps Layle had known from the first day he had the Record-keeper assign Weldon to Birdesmond that matters would end this way. Perhaps all the pain Weldon had undergone in this cell was part of Layle's plan to test the qualifications of Birdesmond.

Perhaps. But he rather suspected that Layle had thought Weldon alone would be able to judge Birdesmond's qualifications, and that the strength of Birdesmond's abilities had taken Layle by surprise. And that too could be treated as proof that Mistress Birdesmond was qualified to be a Seeker.

He looked over at Birdesmond, who was beginning to look thoughtful, as though she were tracing all of this in her own mind. Finally she turned her attention to him and said, "Well. So it is not farewell after all."

"It seems that it is not." Weldon felt dizzy, as though he had watched a prisoner walk out of the dungeon and then turned to find her standing beside him. "Er . . . Welcome to the Eternal Dungeon."

"I have not been accepted as a Seeker yet," Birdesmond reminded him.

"No," Weldon agreed. "But the High Seeker would not have told you of his recommendation if he were not confident that it would be approved. At the very least, I believe it is safe to say that you will be given the opportunity to train here, and to prove whether you are qualified to take your oath of eternal confinement."

"Mm." Birdesmond's eyes wandered away from him, considering the walls. "So six months from now, I could be a vowed Seeker. Tell me, Mr.

Chapman, what was that you told me about Seekers being unable to marry? What was the reason again?"

Weldon stared at her blankly. "Why, because Seekers cannot mate themselves with anyone who has not vowed—"

He stopped, his breath shuddering as though he had been running through darkness for a long time and had suddenly reached a door. A smile curled onto Birdesmond's lips.

He whispered, "But . . . I would not have you take me out of pity . . ."

"Pity?" Birdesmond raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Chapman, have you been listening to nothing I have said this week? I was scorned by men who thought ill of me for my unwomanly desire to work with prisoners. Then I meet a man who not only fails to scorn me, but is actually willing to allow me to search him. Do you really think I would pair myself with such a man out of pity?"

"I . . ." He released his breath and tried again. "I cannot love you. You know that."

"Nor I you," Birdesmond replied calmly. "That is, if by 'love' you mean passion of the heart and body. But if you should mean a desire to join fortunes with one another and care for each other and perhaps raise a family together . . . I think that you will find we have enough love to permit that."

Weldon licked his dry lips. "We will have to ask the Codifier if such a course would be permitted."

Birdesmond's lips twitched into another smile. "Of course. But I wonder whether it has occurred to your Codifier that it could be useful to the High Seeker if his new female Seeker were not an unattached virgin, but instead someone's wife?"

This time Weldon did not answer. His hand moved, as though of its own accord, toward Birdesmond's. Then he stopped himself quickly and stepped back.

Fortunately, Birdesmond understood. "I'm still a prisoner," she observed. "You can't touch me."

"No," responded Weldon. "So let us go and release you from your imprisonment, and then I will show you to your guest quarters, and then . . . Then I think I need to have a talk with the High Seeker. To see whether that cursed man planned this as well." His voice broke with frustration.

Birdesmond laughed. "Very well," she said. "But be gentle on him, Mr. Chapman. He has already made a great sacrifice today for the Eternal Dungeon, much greater than I thought to ask of him. Do you know, I will look forward to working alongside him almost as much as I look forward to being with you?" And she walked to the door and then turned back, waiting for her new love.

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. . . Therefore, we will never fully know what we owe the men who worked in the Eternal Dungeon, particularly those who were employed there before its transition into modern prison conditions.

It has been stated by a careless historian, for example, that the greatest sacrifice made by male Seekers at the time of Layle Smith was their willingness to allow women to become prison workers, at a time when it was popularly thought that such employment would bring destruction to any prison or dungeon. That many of the Seekers – most notably Layle Smith – were required to sacrifice their prejudices and their personal comfort cannot be denied. Yet the historian who made the above statement failed to recognize the far greater sacrifice made by male Seekers who, until this time, had been deprived of intimacy with women.

We know, from the surviving editions of the *Code of Seeking*, that Seekers were not permitted to marry or to enter into more informal sexual arrangements with the women working in the outer portion of the dungeon. Some male Seekers, following long-time prison tradition, must have shared beds with one another. But this could not have been a satisfactory solution for all of the male Seekers, and when we think of how many Seekers over the decades were willing to remain celibate until the ends of their lives, we can imagine such men's relief when the Codifier ruled, at

the time that the first female Seeker arrived, that male and female Seekers could enter into marriage with one another.

To say this is not to downplay the sacrifice made by Seekers who initially opposed the appointment of women to the role of Seeker. Indeed, history tells us clearly that Layle Smith's personal fears on this matter were justified, and that his own sacrifice would be greater than that of any other Seeker. We may therefore regard Layle Smith, if not as the lone creator of transformation therapy, then as the Seeker who was most prepared to turn the principles of this therapy upon himself, thus making clear to the world the benefits of laying oneself open to the painful process of transformation.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***Transformation* 2**
TWISTS AND TURNS

The year 357, the ninth month.

If one were to believe the popular ballads sung about the High Seeker, he spent the first thirty-six years of his life dealing death and destruction at every hand, reached the peak of his infamy by entering into madness (at which time, according to some of the more bizarre ballads, he proceeded to slaughter all the prisoners under his care in the Eternal Dungeon), and then, overnight, turned into a sane and happy man, spending the remainder of his life in unbroken peace.

Of course, the truth is far more complex. For all of his recorded life, Layle Smith struggled with mental illness, and just nine months after he emerged from a brief spell of utter madness, he once again found that the future of his sanity was in question.

We have more information about this second brush with madness than we do about the first. We know that its direct cause was the arrival of the first female Seeker at the Eternal Dungeon, an arrival that apparently broke the

High Seeker's painfully regained mental strength and plunged him back into danger of losing his mind.

The true tale of the Eternal Dungeon, unlike the ballads written about that place, is full of unexpected twists and turns. For it was at this juncture in the history of Yclau's dungeon that a fateful meeting occurred which would change the future of the queendom of Yclau. . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

The office had a waterfall. That was what most visitors found striking about the Codifier's office: it had a natural waterfall that ran down the far side of the room, collected in a pool that reflected the stalactites hanging from the ceiling like dragons' teeth, and then disappeared down some hidden hole in its depths. If you looked carefully, you could see tiny, transparent creatures swimming in the water – creatures that had lived in the underground cave for so long that they had lost all color. How they were able to see to know where to swim, no one who visited the Codifier's office had been able to figure out, for their eyes, if any, were hidden. "Hooded Seekers" they had been tagged long ago.

So most visitors were struck by the waterfall. Weldon Chapman was not. He was struck by the presence of the door.

He tried not to stare too hard at it. Most visitors to this room never guessed what it was: it looked like the door to a great bank vault, and it operated much like one, opening by means of mechanics. It was virtually the only piece of machinery, other than the racks, that was housed in the damp Eternal Dungeon, and it was a miracle that it had not rusted long ago. Yet it continued to work, and Weldon, despite himself, found his eyes drifting over to the ceiling-high water-clock in the corner of the room, which marked the hours between dawn and dusk.

Then he forced his gaze away from this as well. The doorways that led to this room were nearly as heavily guarded as the main exit from the dungeon; Weldon had passed through two sets of guards to reach here. Even so, at this time of day the office would usually be deserted but for its owner and his trusted secretary in the adjoining room. That three other men were permitted to sit here now was a measure of the Codifier's trust in them.

The presence of the eldest man was perhaps not a sign of trust but simply an acknowledgment that he, unlike the other two guests in the room, was permitted to walk through that door. His hair was grey, and he had mutton-chop whiskers, the traditional appearance of a healer. At the moment, he was frowning.

"'When will he be well?'" he repeated in a loud voice. "Bloody blades, man, shouldn't you be asking me *whether* he will be well?"

Weldon glanced at the Codifier. Had he received this response from any other member of the dungeon, however exalted in title, the Codifier would have promptly melted that person with a fierceness as heated as the dragon he was rumored to have once been. It seemed, however, that he accepted a healer's right to be eccentric. The Codifier's hands remained folded calmly on his desk as he said in a voice so mild that it was almost hid by the harsh whisper of the waterfall, "Will he get well, then?"

"Ask the fates!" shot back Mr. Bergsen, the dungeon's healer. "They have a better idea than I do. In all my lifetime, I've never dealt with a case this bad."

Weldon threw a worried look at the youngest guest in the room, who was staring at the water rushing its way down the wall. It was a sign of great trust that the Codifier would permit this young man to sit in this room at this time of day. Weldon doubted, though, that Elsdon Taylor had given any thought to the honor, and that in itself explained why the junior Seeker was permitted here. His mind and his heart were so manifestly bound to one person in the Eternal Dungeon that there was no chance he was even contemplating the possibilities inherent in that door.

Elsdon appeared not to have heard the healer's words. He continued to stare blankly at the waterfall.

"It would help," the Codifier suggested with just the barest hint of a dragon biting down on its meal, "if you could provide more details on the illness. Is it the same as last time?"

Mr. Bergsen shook his head. He looked angry, as any healer might be who was faced with an illness he could not cure. "The dreamings are different this time. They are all of women. We know the reason for that." He turned his face toward Weldon, his brows drawn low over his eyes.

Weldon forced himself to relax. Unlike the furious whispers he had heard amongst other dungeon inhabitants during the past six weeks, the healer's words were not an accusation; they were simply the recital of a fact known

by everyone in this office. Weldon found himself thankful, though, that the dungeon's newest Seeker-in-Training had not been invited to this meeting.

"All of women," Mr. Bergsen went on. "Women being raped, or mutilated, or screaming from hooks in the ceiling – do you really want me to detail the various ways that the High Seeker has contemplated destroying women in his dreamings?"

"That will not be necessary." The Codifier's voice was brisk and businesslike, though Weldon had seen Elsdon grow tense. Perhaps he was listening after all. Or perhaps he was simply contemplating the situation.

"And his dreamings are taking over his mind, as they did last year?" the Codifier persisted.

Mr. Bergsen shook his head. "No, the High Seeker has managed to keep them at bay this time. During the daytime, at least; no man can control what his mind does at night."

The Codifier raised one thin, sand-colored eyebrow. "Then I fail to see the problem."

Mr. Bergsen looked as though he were a coal-gas balloon that had inflated too much and was in danger of bursting. "The problem? The problem? The problem, Mr. Daniels, is that it is taking every last ounce of the High Seeker's strength to push back the dreamings. He has no energy left to do the simplest tasks, whether that task be to pick up a chamber-pot or to walk across the room. He would starve to death if he didn't have others to feed him!"

The Codifier accepted this news without change of expression. He switched his gaze to the third guest in the office: the man in charge of the inner dungeon's day shift, a Seeker whose seniority was second only to the High Seeker's. "You have been helping care for the High Seeker, Mr. Chapman," he said. "Is this your assessment of the situation as well?"

"It is hard for me to tell, sir," Weldon replied. "Mr. Smith has not been able to make himself understood to anyone other than Mr. Taylor for a fortnight now. He has stopped even trying to speak to the rest of us during the past two days."

The office was silent, and Weldon wondered whether the others were thinking what he was: that the last time the High Seeker had ceased to speak, it had been a sign that he was about to be pulled into utter madness.

"Has the High Seeker said anything that it would be useful for me to know, Mr. Taylor? . . . Mr. Taylor?"

The dragon's teeth bit, with a change in the Codifier's tone. It was clear enough a warning to bring Elsdon back into awareness, but the junior Seeker barely seemed to see the Codifier as he turned his head. "Sir, please," he said. "I ought not to be here – the High Seeker may need me . . ."

He was already halfway out of his seat. Weldon stared at him, his jaw slack. It was like watching a mouse scurry over the whiskers of a carnivore. The Codifier opened his mouth, and fire emerged. *"Mr. Taylor! You will seat yourself!"*

Even the healer winced. Elsdon, singed, sank slowly back into his seat, but there was a stubborn look in his eyes that did not bode well for his future. Weldon remembered the rumors he had heard, during his year as a dungeon guard, that some men entered the Codifier's office and were never seen again. It was popularly thought that the Hooded Seeker Fish ate what remained of their corpses.

The Codifier waited a moment to see whether Elsdon would make any further protest. Then he said in his usual composed voice, "Mr. Chapman, I trust that the High Seeker is being cared for at this moment?"

"His senior night guard is watching over him," Weldon replied. "Mr. Sobel has helped to care for Mr. Smith on occasion in the past, when both Mr. Taylor and I were busy."

"But never when the High Seeker was so ill! Please, sir . . ."

Elsdon's body had the tension of a prisoner who has taken one look at the rack and is desperately seeking the swiftest escape. The Codifier said imperturbably, "If the Eternal Dungeon is to continue to function – and continue to assist its prisoners – then I must have the information that will

allow me to make the right decisions about Mr. Smith's future in this dungeon. Kindly remember your oath, Mr. Taylor."

This silenced the junior Seeker, as nothing else could have done. He settled fully back into the chair, his hands gripping the arm-rests so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Even with the cloth of his hood covering his face, it could be seen that his expression was one of misery.

After a minute in which the Codifier gave him a pointed look, Elsdon seemed to remember that he had been asked a question, for he said wearily, "No, he . . . he is concerned about the dungeon, of course. That is what he speaks of most of all – his concern that he has once again abandoned his duties. It's no use trying to make him think about his own health; he won't center his thoughts on himself. So instead I've been trying to make him think about . . . us. Him and me."

"You're perfectly right," said Mr. Bergsen gruffly. "Make him remember his love-bond with you, and that will keep him from losing touch with this world."

The Codifier picked up a pen, rolled it between his fingers for a moment, and said, with the finality of a magistrate about to pass judgment, "Do you have anything else you wish to add, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon looked as though he would have liked to speak, but he said nothing. Weldon felt pity enter himself as he watched the High Seeker's love-mate. It must be like waiting to see whether your loved one would be hanged. If the Codifier ruled that the High Seeker's renewed illness and long absence from searching prisoners was grounds to remove him from his work as a Seeker . . . Every man in this room knew that it would be a sentence of death to take that from Layle Smith. Yet, as always, the best interests of the prisoners came first. And the Codifier was the man who, in the end, must decide what was in their interests. He was the prisoners' advocate.

Weldon looked over at Mr. Bergsen. A word or two from the healer that Layle showed signs of reaching the end of his illness would be all the Codifier needed to delay making a decision. But the healer glared at the fish in the pool at his feet.

The room was silent but for the rushing of water in the fall. Even the soft, steady drops of the water clock could not be heard over the fall's plunging progress.

Then Weldon heard a clank, followed by a rapid series of clicks and a groan of metal. He turned his head, his breath pressing against the back of his throat. The locking mechanism of the door, having sensed the arrival of dusk, had acted accordingly, and the mighty door was swinging open to the lighted world.

He could not tear his eyes from the scene that opened to him, though the approaching night cast grey shadows over the small portion of the world that could be seen from his seat. The mouth of the cave opened out to woodland at the foot of the cavernous mount on which the Queen's palace was housed. Though the fenced park ended not far from here, giving way to crowded city streets, he thought he could catch sight of a few brown leaves on the ground that betokened autumn. Weldon had forgotten that it was autumn. He marked his reports each day with the date, but he had forgotten that autumn meant falling leaves. He wondered what else he had forgotten about the lighted world.

Despite the magnetic pull of the outdoors scene, he found himself glancing at the others in the office. Mr. Bergsen, who lived in the Eternal Dungeon but visited the lighted world periodically, seemed unmoved by the display before him. He had taken out his notes on Layle Smith's case and was thumbing through them, as though he might find the path to Layle's sanity there. What was more surprising was that Elsdon was not looking at the view. True, he had been confined within the Eternal Dungeon for only two years, but he was twenty, at an age when such confinement cut most keenly. Yet he seemed indifferent to the spectacle before him; he had returned to contemplating the waterfall.

The Codifier put down his pen and stood up. He walked to the cave mouth. He placed his hand on the great, yard-thick door, which was so beautifully balanced on its hinges that it swung in either direction at a man's touch. Weldon held his breath, waiting to see what words the Codifier would speak before he stepped through that doorway and returned home for his night's rest.

But Mr. Daniels simply pushed the door shut. Long ago, Weldon knew, this had been the only entrance to and from the Eternal Dungeon. Though two other entrances had been cut to the cave since then, Weldon felt as though he were witnessing the end of his final chance to re-enter the lighted world.

Except that he had never planned to walk through that door. That was why he was trusted enough to sit here. That was why any Seeker might be permitted to sit here at this time of day, though no other prisoner could be trusted that far.

The Codifier did not close the door completely; he left it ajar and returned to his seat. If he was aware that the sight of the cracked door behind him was maddeningly enticing, he gave no sign of it as he looked over at Weldon. "Mr. Chapman," he said, "do you have anything to add?"

"I have a message from my Seeker-in-Training, sir," Weldon replied. "Mistress Birdesmond asked me to let you know that she is willing to take leave from her training and live in the outer dungeon for a space of time if that would be of help to the High Seeker."

Mr. Bergsen growled in his throat, though whether with approval or disapproval was not clear. Elsdon showed slight signs of being aware of his surroundings again.

"Yes," said the Codifier, pulling a piece of paper in front of him. "I have received a letter concerning that subject from Mistress Birdesmond. She assures me that she accepts the healer's assessment that she is in no danger from Mr. Smith. However, in light of the importance of the High Seeker's health to this dungeon, she has offered to abort her training as a Seeker and return to the lighted world."

Elsdon's head snapped round; Mr. Bergsen leaned forward in his seat. Weldon, feeling as though a prisoner had just brought the heavy stone of a sleeping bench down upon his head, started to speak, and then bit his lip.

It was Elsdon who broke the silence, saying, "Mr. Daniels, I do not believe that would assist the High Seeker. He is already crushed by guilt at the trouble his illness has brought to the Eternal Dungeon. If he learned that a

new Seeker had left before taking her oath, simply because of his illness, then that news might be the lash that destroyed his mind."

The Codifier nodded. "In any case, I believe that it would set a poor precedent to allow the health of one Seeker to determine whether another Seeker was permitted to finish her training. Mr. Chapman, the training is proceeding well?"

"I am not the most unbiased observer, sir," Weldon said slowly, "but Mr. Smith, before this latest phase of the illness took hold of him, seemed pleased by Mistress Birdesmond's progress. He said he saw no reason why she should not complete her training."

"And leaving aside the situation with Mr. Smith's illness, Mistress Birdesmond still wishes to make her oath of eternal confinement at the end of her training period?"

"She is fully committed, sir," Weldon replied firmly.

"Hmm." The Codifier tapped his pen upon the side of his inkwell for a minute, staring down at the papers in front of him. Elsdon stirred in his seat and looked toward the door – not the yard-thick door, still tantalizingly ajar, but the door leading back to the inner dungeon and to the High Seeker's cell.

"Mr. Chapman," said the Codifier with such abruptness that everyone in the room could be heard catching their breaths. "At the time that Mistress Birdesmond began her training, she and you requested my ruling on whether Seekers might be permitted to marry one another."

Weldon had the amusement, then, of seeing Elsdon's body jerk with shock, in such a manner as Weldon had not seen the young man react since his earliest months in the dungeon. The healer looked unsurprised. Weldon and Birdesmond had already consulted him concerning certain matters to which he alone could provide the answers.

Weldon cleared his throat, which had suddenly become clogged. "Yes, sir. You said that you would need to consult with the Queen and with the High Seeker to determine whether such an action was acceptable under the *Code of Seeking*."

Still tapping his pen, the Codifier nodded. "I have since spoken with the Queen, and while I did not have the opportunity to speak to Mr. Smith about this before his present illness, on the day before he took leave from his supervisory duties he sent me the research notes he had prepared back in the days when he revised the *Code of Seeking*, giving his reasons for permitting Seekers to form love-bonds with one another. I doubt that was a coincidence." The Codifier's voice turned dry.

Weldon could see from the look in Elsdon's eyes that the junior Seeker was smiling under his hood. It was well known that the only person in the Eternal Dungeon who was more keen-eyed than the Codifier was the High Seeker. Weldon, now feeling as though the entire dungeon had walked in on him while he was kissing Birdesmond, cleared his throat again and asked, "Have you made your decision, sir?"

"The Queen and I are in firm agreement that it would be inappropriate for Mistress Birdesmond to become your love-mate." The Codifier's voice was flat. "We have always discouraged love-bonds between male and female workers in the outer dungeon, believing that such informal agreements do not provide a firm enough framework for a family, should children be conceived. However," he added as Weldon opened his mouth, "we see no such objections to a marriage. We have certain concerns that will need to be addressed, but the Queen agrees with me that the principles of the Code permit Seekers to marry one another."

Weldon felt as weak as a newborn lamb. Before he could gather his wits to thank the Codifier, Mr. Daniels asked, "And if you should have children?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Weldon saw that Mr. Bergsen was now rummaging through his work-bag, inspecting the instruments there. This was wise; the healer's face always revealed too much. Grateful that his hood hid his own naked expression, Weldon replied, "Only the fates can say whether we will have a family, sir."

"I am aware of that fact, Mr. Chapman." Suddenly the dragon's teeth were there again, shown in warning. "What I wish to know is what steps Mistress Birdesmond plans to take if she should find herself with child. Will she give suck to the infant while she is searching her prisoners?"

Elsdon did not smile this time; Weldon was grateful for that. He himself was slow to anger, a characteristic that aided him in his work with sarcastic prisoners, but he could feel the low burn of his temper. He and Birdesmond had known that she, as the first female Seeker, would bear the brunt of the ridicule that would inevitably be directed toward the first married Seekers. He had hoped, however, that this ridicule would not come from those who were in a position of authority over her.

"No, sir," replied Weldon curtly. "Mistress Birdesmond recognizes that her oath as a Seeker will require her to place the best interests of the prisoners first. She does not believe that it would be in the best interests of the prisoners for her to search them while she is with child, or before the child is weaned. Therefore, she will request healing leave during that period."

There was a deathlike silence. Weldon added, somewhat desperately, "I realize that such extended leave has little precedent—"

The Codifier seemed to have lost interest in what he was saying. He switched his gaze away and said, "Mr. Taylor?"

Turning his head, Weldon saw, with a certain ruefulness, that the junior Seeker already knew what question was on the Codifier's mind, and was musing upon it.

His consideration was brief. "Yes, sir. Since Mistress Birdesmond would have taken this step in any case, I'm sure that the High Seeker would have no objections."

"Good." The Codifier carefully laid his pen down onto the table. "Mr. Chapman, you may tell Mistress Birdesmond that I approve her earlier request for leave from her training. I will ask the Record-keeper to reassign her to a cell in the outer dungeon. Once that is done, and the appropriate rites have taken place, you are welcome to move into that cell."

Weldon realized he was gaping like one of the Hooded Seeker Fish, and he shut his mouth. Elsdon's eyes were smiling again, while the healer was openly grinning. Finally Weldon said weakly, "But sir, she has not yet made her oath."

The Codifier nodded. He was now straightening the pile of papers on his desk that required no straightening. "Under ordinary circumstances, I would require that Mistress Birdesmond have already completed her training and given her oath, but the circumstances are unusual. In all other respects, however, regulations will be abided by. Because of your seniority, you may receive three months' leave to honor your wedding, and I will grant your new wife the same amount of leave. And I would like to suggest, Mr. Chapman," the Codifier said, leaning over his desk, "that it would be extremely convenient for this dungeon if, by the end of that time, Mistress Birdesmond should find herself with child."

In the silence that followed, Weldon could hear the low whistle of wind through the open doorway. He cleared his throat before saying, "Mistress Birdesmond and I will do our best, sir."

The healer looked quickly away again, but there was a flicker in Elsdon's eyes, and Weldon realized, with a clenching of his heart, that the junior Seeker had guessed certain facts that Weldon and Birdesmond had agreed they ought not to share with the world.

Then he reminded himself that any secrets of his that Elsdon Taylor held were as tightly locked behind the junior Seeker's lips as the Eternal Dungeon's prisoners were in their cells. Weldon took a deep breath to settle himself as the Codifier opened a drawer to place his pen inside.

"Very well," Mr. Daniels said. "I will inform the Queen that a delay should be made on deciding Mr. Smith's future until it can be determined whether this change has a positive effect on his health."

Elsdon's sigh was audible. Weldon looked over at the healer, but his heart grew heavy as he saw the continued gravity on the healer's face. No guarantee of recovery, then, not even with Birdesmond gone from the inner dungeon.

The Codifier seemed to share Mr. Bergsen's assessment, for as he rose from his desk he said, "I must tell all of you that I take very seriously the fact that Mr. Smith has now been absent from his regular duties for a full year and shows no signs of ever being able to return to searching prisoners. This would be a serious enough matter if Mr. Smith were an ordinary Seeker, but this dungeon cannot continue to function without a

High Seeker. I therefore regret to inform you that, if Mr. Smith does not show signs of improvement during the next few weeks, or at least signs that his condition has stabilized, I will have no choice but to advise the Queen that the High Seeker be relieved of his title and placed in retirement due to incurable illness."

Weldon could not bear to look at Elsdon to see what the junior Seeker's eyes held. Instead he rose to his feet, saying, "I'm sure your patience will be rewarded, sir."

"Hmm." The Codifier reached for the necktie hanging over a stalagmite nearby. Like the Seekers, he wore only a shirt and trousers while working – the Eternal Dungeon had developed its own distinctive uniform over the years, based upon the small amount of clothing that prisoners throughout the queendom of Yclau were permitted to wear. But unlike the Seekers, half of Mr. Daniels's time was spent in the lighted world, and now he proceeded to don the necktie, vest, coat, hat, and gloves that ordinary high-born men were burdened with.

Elsdon was already beginning to edge toward the door leading to the inner dungeon. The Codifier, confirming to himself that his vest-pocket watch had survived another day in the damp dungeon, said without looking up, "You may remain here for the present, Mr. Taylor. I will need to speak to Mr. Smith for the next half of an hour, to tell him of my decisions."

Elsdon, his hand already on the latch, said quickly, "I should be present, sir. You may not be able to understand Mr. Smith without my assistance."

"Our discussion must be private," the Codifier said, unmoved. "Mr. Smith and I have always found ways to make ourselves understood to one another."

He walked without hurry to the door, courteously holding it open so that Mr. Bergsen could pass through. The healer left, looking as unhappy as he had been when he arrived. The Codifier followed him out, but as he passed Elsdon, he slipped something out of his pocket and placed it in Elsdon's hand, accompanying it with a murmur. Elsdon made no reply to what had been said. Once more he had gone rigid, like a pup straining on its leash.

In the last minute before Mr. Daniels closed the door, he paused to look back. "Oh, Mr. Chapman," he said. "I will be leaving today by way of the entrance to the palace, since I must speak with the Queen about this matter. I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to shut my doors when you leave."

He swept through the doorway. The guards outside, standing stiffly at alert with their whips in readiness against any skilled prisoner who managed to escape this far, did not so much as glance at the two prisoners left in the Codifier's office as they slammed the door shut.

o—o—o

Weldon's gaze moved, as though wrenched unwillingly, to the great door at the back of the room. Presently he discovered that he was standing beside it. He touched the door, intending to push it shut, but instead he found himself pulling it open.

A soft breeze touched him, for the first time in thirteen years. The wind was cool, but no cooler than the cave, which maintained an autumnal temperature year-round. With the breeze came the smell of smoke from city chimneys, and the smell of earth, and the smell of leaves. He barely noticed any of this.

He had grown used to the blacks and greys and whites of the Eternal Dungeon, with the occasional somber olive or russet striking his eye like a bright banner. There were richer shades of color in the outer dungeon, where the workers from the lighted world lived, but it had been several years since Weldon had visited there; all of his friends lived in the inner dungeon. Even the Seekers' common room, though separated from most of the inner dungeon, was connected to the rest of the inner dungeon by a corridor that did not cross with any outer dungeon corridor.

Blacks and greys and whites. And before him was fire in the air, a song of brilliant golds and reds. The leaf-colors were undimmed by the dusk, for the door faced west, and the setting sun was sending its light straight through the trees of the royal park. The leaves flickered in the wind, like flames upon a log. His eyes were blind with color.

"Where's the frost?"

Weldon looked over at Elsdon, who had come to stand beside him. The junior Seeker's eyes were searching the leaf-strewn ground, as though seeking something that had been lost.

It took Weldon a moment to remember. It was not merely that his memory must go further back in time than Elsdon's; this scene stunned Weldon because he had never before seen it. Unlike the high-born young man beside him, Weldon had not grown up in a district with tree-lined avenues and cross-street parks. His memories were of cobblestone roads hugging houses made of dull slate, all of them grimy from the smoke of nearby manufactories.

There had been one year in his early childhood, though, when his mother had worked as a maid in the Parkside district, and he had accompanied her to work. "Not in the evening," he said finally. "The frost only comes in the morning, after the night has been cold."

"Oh." The disappointment was deep in Elsdon's voice. Weldon wondered what happy memories the junior Seeker connected with autumn frost. Schoolday memories, no doubt.

Weldon spent a minute more staring silently upon the picture of fire and song. Then he looked over at Elsdon, who gazed back silently. Without need for words, the two of them reached forward together and pushed the door shut.

The impact of the door's closure sent a boom through the room that caused the pool to shake and the sleeping fish to scatter. Within seconds, a series of metallic clicks could be heard – the bolts of the door, sliding into place until the internal timer should signal that the morning had begun. Weldon, staring at the door where the park had been, wondered whether he would ever see the lighted world again. He thought it unlikely. There had been talk, earlier in the year, of removing this anachronistic door and replacing it with a solid wall. The plans for construction had only been halted by the High Seeker's renewed illness.

Weldon turned away from the door. Elsdon was already staring at the other door, his fingers working against each other in a nervous fashion that he had not shown even during the most painful days of his training. Weldon

glanced at the water-clock in the corner, but little time had passed since the Codifier had left.

Seeking to distract Elsdon from his worries, Weldon asked, "What is it that Mr. Daniels gave you? Or is it private?"

Elsdon gave himself a slight shake, and then forced his eyes away from the door to the inner dungeon. "A letter from the lighted world. Mr. Daniels told me that, if I should want to discuss the contents of it with him, he would be available to speak to me before he left this evening."

Weldon looked down at the letter. The envelope was hidden in the shadow of Elsdon's body; all that Weldon could see was that it was carefully bound with the twine still used by some of the older inhabitants of Yclau, who had not yet learned to trust such innovations as free-post deliverers.

"How the bloody blades did he know to say that?" asked Weldon. "He hasn't opened the letter."

Elsdon gave a slight laugh. "What difference would that make, to someone like the Codifier?" He glanced down at the letter, his face showing no interest. As he brought the envelope up into the lamplight, the address became clear: it was written in spotty ink, all in capitals, with a shaky hand. "Master Elsdon Taylor," it said. "The Eternal Dunjun."

"Do you know who that's from?" Weldon asked, his curiosity perked by the boyhood title on the envelope.

Elsdon had a faint smile in his eyes as he stared down at the twined letter. "My father's carriage-driver."

Weldon raised his eyebrows. Then, remembering that Elsdon could not easily see his expression, he raised the face-cloth of his hood. "Your father's carriage-driver writes to you here?"

Elsdon nodded as he pulled up the face-cloth of his own hood, first glancing at the door to the inner dungeon to ascertain that it was still closed. "When he heard that I'd been handed over to the Eternal Dungeon, he wrote a letter to the High Seeker, threatening to lash him with his carriage-whip if any Seeker so much as touched me."

Weldon chuckled. "It must have come as a shock to him to learn that you were unharmed."

Elsdon nodded. "I couldn't tell him the full story of what had happened, of course, but I was able to assure him that I wasn't being tortured and that I was well cared for. That was enough to satisfy him. We've exchanged a few letters since then. Not many; neither of us is skilled at letter-writing. . . . It's good to know that I still have a connection with the lighted world. However small." His gaze switched back to the letter.

Weldon said nothing. He had been present on the day that Elsdon, with a mercy that amazed the older Seeker, had remained sleepless through the entire night in order to write a letter to his father with the aim of mending matters between them.

Weldon had also been present the following afternoon when the reply arrived: it consisted of nothing but an envelope filled with the tattered remains of Elsdon's letter. From the look of the fragments, it appeared that Elsdon's father had not even tried to open his son's correspondence before tearing it to pieces.

Elsdon had not spoken of his father since that time. Weldon, whose only family ties had been severed in an equally painful manner – through the violent death of his parents – felt strong empathy for Elsdon. He was not sure which was worse: losing one's family before entering the Eternal Dungeon, or remaining connected with one's family but knowing that you could never visit their home again.

Evidently seeking to escape these memories, Elsdon said, "You've been keeping secrets from me."

Weldon forced himself to smile. "Birdesmond and I thought it best not to discuss this with anyone until we had received the Codifier's ruling. So you thought I was happily reconciled to an unbonded life?"

"Well, no," said Elsdon frankly. "I knew that you loved Birdesmond, and she you. But that you should seek to change your single bed for a double bed . . . I didn't think you would do that."

Weldon, who had been responsible for part of Elsdon's training as a Seeker, knew that the young man was capable of stunning prisoners into confessions by his simple acts of candor. He thought to himself that it was unusually tactful of Elsdon not to have said, "I didn't think you *could* do that."

Weldon stared at the clear-bodied fish in the pool, who were continuing to swim restlessly in the water that had been disturbed by the closure of the cave door. The fall of water nearby sent endless waves rippling through the pool, distorting the fish's images and making them seem even stranger than they really were.

Beside him, Elsdon said, "I wouldn't worry, you know." As Weldon raised his eyes to see the junior Seeker's smile, Elsdon added, "I don't think there was much of that between my parents either, but they managed to have me."

Two years before, when Weldon was awaiting an appointment in the High Seeker's office, he had been nearly scared into rebirth when the High Seeker had announced his entrance by way of slamming the door shut behind him, then throwing his document-board onto his desk with such force that the solid oak table almost crumpled to pieces. Convinced that a major disaster had befallen the Eternal Dungeon – perhaps an imminent attack by the Vovimians, perhaps a decision by the Queen to abolish the *Code of Seeking* – Weldon had asked Layle Smith what was wrong.

In a tight voice, the High Seeker had replied, "I am searching a prisoner who is as blunt as I am subtle."

Weldon reflected that little had changed since that time. Feeling his face burn as hot as a Flame of Rebirth, Weldon turned his attention again to the cascade of water surging down the office wall. Under the lamplight, a faint rainbow could be seen in its spray, the most color he had ever witnessed in the inner dungeon. Though perhaps he had simply not noticed other signs of color here. Birdesmond had a gift for showing him things about the Eternal Dungeon he had never seen before; perhaps he should ask her about this.

Trying to bring the conversation back to its normal state, he said, "In one respect, I regret the Codifier's decision: if I marry Birdesmond now, I will

have difficulty in assisting you to care for the High Seeker. You ought not to have to carry that full burden."

"Don't worry about that." The junior Seeker's voice was quiet, but his eye had drifted toward the door. Weldon glanced at the water-clock. One-sixth of an hour remained.

Weldon said slowly, "I've been of little help to you during the past few days in any case. I wish that I could be of more use."

He felt the familiar pain that accompanied this thought, and turned aside from it at once. He had come to accept, since Birdesmond's arrival, that some deficiencies in his life could never be mended. This was only one more loss he must accept.

After a moment, he saw that Elsdon was watching him steadily. "I'm sorry, Weldon," the junior Seeker said softly. "I spoke to him again about this a few weeks ago, urging him to mend his friendship with you. But then . . . Well, then the illness grew worse."

"Don't bother him with such matters," Weldon said, his voice suddenly made gruff by emotion. "As the High Seeker would say, the past is past. All of that occurred over a decade ago; it's not worth thinking about any more."

He wondered whether the time would ever come when he believed these words. He could tell from Elsdon's expression that he had not sounded convincing, so he added, "I have other matters to worry about now, such as an impending wedding." Then, seeing Elsdon's right eyebrow shoot up, he realized belatedly that his phrasing was not the proper one for a man looking forward to his wedding night. He felt his face grow flush again. He added defensively, "We have spent these weeks in much eagerness to begin sharing our lives together. Mind you," he added in concession to that raised eyebrow, "it will be an unusual marriage."

Elsdon laughed. "I've no doubt of that. You two are unusual people. Sara always said that the people who were different from the rest of the world deserved to find each other and share friendship."

Then a pained expression entered the junior Seeker's face, as it always did when he mentioned that name. Seeing that he had turned the conversation onto the wrong road again, Weldon said hastily, "You had better open that letter now, in case it really is something you need to discuss with the Codifier. He'll be gone from the dungeon in a few minutes."

Cheered by this reminder that he would be able to return soon to his love-mate, Elsdon smiled and began the painful work of undoing the twine without knife or other blade with which to assist him. Weldon was beginning to wonder whether he ought to borrow a dagger from one of the guards outside when Elsdon managed to wrench open the end of the envelope and slide out the letter within. He unfolded it and held it up to the light.

His smile faded. A moment later his face faded, the blood draining away as though he were a man who had been pulled asunder on the rack.

"Sweet blood, no," he whispered. "Not now. Please, any time but now."

CHAPTER TWO

The death room was bright with chatter and laughter. In one corner of the room, next to the door leading to the entrance hall, a chamber orchestra played a sprightly dance tune. A drunken couple clasped one another tightly about their waists, swaying in time to the music in a manner that elicited raised eyebrows from the older members of the room, who remembered a time when such touching was never permitted on the dance floor. Nobody interfered, though. Everyone was too busy talking and eating pastries that were being served by smartly dressed servants.

One of the servants, a young woman with her face flushed from the effort of carrying the heavy tray, paused at the window and looked out. Music was drifting into the house, but it was not the stately music of a chamber orchestra: it was ragged and raucous, the sound of untrained voices singing in the street. The young woman looked as though she would have liked to have joined the singing. But then a nearby guest called out to her, and she hurried over to offer him sweetmeats.

Yeslin, who was standing near a second doorway through which servants disappeared periodically, sympathized with the young woman. With his father's encouragement, he had spent much of the summer preparing a ballad to sing at the Autumn Commoners' Festival, when the servants of the Parkside district were released from their chores to celebrate the arrival of frost. Unlike the other commoners of this household, Yeslin had not been forbidden from attending the festival. All that kept him in this house was the thought of a man who probably did not even know he was here.

Yeslin turned his head to look. The southern half of the room, the portion facing the main entrance of the house, was crowded with elite guests, but the back half was empty but for a night-table, and a bed, and a man lying motionless on the bed. As Yeslin watched, another man detached himself from a group of guests that was laughing and made his way to the bedside. He leaned over the man, appearing to inspect him for signs of life.

Yeslin felt his stomach clench, and he forced himself to look away. The dancing couple had just come perilously close to upsetting a footman holding a tray full of champagne glasses. A few of the guests, who had

shown no concern earlier at the unseemly dancing, now came forward to persuade the dancers not to destroy their refreshments. Biting his lip, Yeslin searched the crowd for a sign that at least a few of the guests were treating this occasion with sobriety. Finally he found a small group of guests – two men and three women – talking with earnest expressions on their faces. No laughter came from their part of the room. Yeslin edged forward as unobtrusively as possible.

The orchestra paused; during the interval, the words of the song outside could be clearly heard. It was *The Ballad of the Dying Prisoner*, which was one of Yeslin's favorites, but before he could judge whether the ballad was well rendered by its singer, the violins had started up another sprightly tune. Under the renewed cover of their notes, Yeslin walked closer to the earnest-looking guests. He could hear now what they were saying.

". . . no heirs to leave his house and business to. There was only the one son, and he's gone."

"And the daughter too."

"The son killed the daughter, did you know that?" One of the women, in a bright red gown, announced this piece of tired gossip as though unveiling a new fashion. "I saw the body after it happened – the sight was simply shocking. I had nightmares for days afterwards."

"I told you that you shouldn't have looked, sweet one," said the man beside her.

"Oh, but I had to see what had happened, didn't I? I mean, it happened right next door to us. And her father was with us when the screams started. You should have seen the look on his face!"

"I heard that, when they arrested the son, his face was as cold and remorseless as though he'd killed a dozen girls – is that so?"

"Utterly remorseless." The woman in the red gown nodded. "I saw it myself."

"I'd have described his expression as stunned," said the man beside her.

The second man gave a sharp laugh. "Stunned at his success? I'd imagine so. Not many murderers can accomplish so bloody a killing without any weapons."

"The poor man." Another of the women, wearing a gown of sparkling beads, cast a glance at the figure lying motionless on the bed. "To lose his daughter in such a way, and for the murderer to be his own son . . ."

"That's not what I heard," said the third woman abruptly. She had been busy inspecting her face with a palm-sized mirror, which she now slipped into her purse. "I heard that the girl's true murderer was her father."

Several members of the group looked instinctively around to see whether anyone was close enough to hear. All that they saw was a commoner youth kneeling down to wipe up a drink that had spilled. Reassured, they leaned in closer to listen.

In a satisfied tone, the woman with the mirror said, "I heard all about it from De Vere – he works at Parkside Prison, you know, and he attended the son's trial. The son testified that, when he was quite young, his father murdered his mother—"

"No!"

"Oh, yes. And the son said that his father used to tie him to his bed and beat him till he was bloody. And that drove the son out of his mind, and that's why he killed his sister."

"He couldn't have been as crazy as all that if he was giving testimony," the second man objected with a snort.

"Still, you never know. The kindest looking men may hold dark secrets in their lives. . . ."

Everyone turned to look at the figure lying motionless on the bed. After a moment, the woman in the red gown said, "You know, now that I think of it, the son's expression really was stunned."

"Stunned with remorse, no doubt," her husband supplied.

"Or stunned with craziness," suggested the woman with the bright beads. "Completely driven out of his mind by his father's cold-hearted abuse."

"Or the son could have lied about it all," persisted the second man, evidently relishing the role of expressing the minority viewpoint. "He could have made it all up to save his own life."

"Well, he didn't succeed, did he?" remarked the first man.

"He succeeded well enough to save himself from the hangman."

"But the magistrate gave him over to the Seekers. How long do you think prisoners survive in the Eternal Dungeon?"

The woman in the beaded gown gave a dramatic shiver. "Oh, please, let's not talk of such things."

"De Vere told me that, when the son wasn't sentenced to a hanging, his father was furious," said the woman with the mirror. "And he was only satisfied when he learned that the son would be handed over to the hooded Seekers to be tortured for the remainder of his life."

"Let's hope his life was short, then," said the woman in the red gown, who was now dabbing at the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. "Poor boy. That he should have been driven to such a terrible deed by so cruel a father . . ." She glared in the direction of the man on the bed.

"Really, you know," said the second man, "I'm not at all sure we should have come here today. He doesn't deserve our presence." He turned to take another glass of champagne from one of the passing servants.

Yeslin, putting aside the champagne glass he had picked up from the floor, took a step toward the speakers, and then felt his body yanked back with a painful jerk. Twisting his body to look, he saw that he had been hauled back by Harden Pevsner.

Mr. Pevsner was proof against the saying that face reveals character. He had bland blue eyes, and hair the color of wheat in sunlight. In this respect, he looked very much like his brother.

His hand was tight upon Yeslin's arm, though, as he hissed, "If you cannot keep from glaring at the guests, you ought not to be here."

"But they're telling lies about him!" Yeslin whispered back. "And they're dancing and laughing. . . ."

Mr. Pevsner's grip bit down yet harder as he gave a thin smile at the red-gowned woman, who was now staring with curiosity at the nearby scene. Pulling Yeslin away from the crowd, toward the western window, he waited until they were beyond hearing of the men and women before saying in a soft voice, "The death vigil is intended to give a dying person the opportunity to see his friends and neighbors for a final time – not in mourning, which would be inappropriate for a man facing his rebirth, but visiting in joy in order to remind him of the transformation he will soon undergo. I know that this is hard for you to understand, since you do not have such customs where you come from."

The words, which would have been a gentle reproof if spoken by Mr. Pevsner's brother, were voiced like a falling lash. Yeslin felt himself grow cold. He had forgotten how important it was – so very important – not to act in any way that reminded Mr. Pevsner that he did not belong in this room, but instead should be outside on the streets, where the singing continued.

Mr. Pevsner, having failed to receive a reply, opened his mouth to remonstrate further, and then jerked his gaze away toward the window. "What the bloody blazes is that man doing?" he asked.

Mr. Pevsner never swore; that was one of the more irritating aspects of him. He did not swear, but neither did he refrain from words that might convey impurity. Instead, he took a middle road, inventing words which sounded like oaths but which could not be held against him if anyone accused him of blasphemy. Thus he had the pleasure of breaking the rules without having to accept the consequences for it.

Yeslin craned his neck to look out the window. Beyond the gardens – carefully tended since Yeslin's arrival at the house the previous spring – was a white picket fence, and beyond that the sidewalk and street. The side of the street nearest the house was lined with carriages; most of the neighbors had at least taken the minimal effort to come in their less gaily painted conveyances. The carriage-drivers looked bored as they sat obediently in their seats, awaiting the return of their masters and mistresses.

One carriage-driver, though, was standing on the street beside his horse, which was not hitched to any vehicle. Unlike the other carriage-drivers, he was wearing stable-clothes, patched and muddy. He held in his hand a bucket. As Yeslin watched, the man upended the bucket, splashing water onto both his own horse and the horse of the nearest carriage. The driver of that carriage looked amused rather than angry; Yeslin heard him call out a cheery remark to the driver on the street.

"Blundering imbecile," muttered Mr. Pevsner. "He's making a spectacle of himself, and of this household. Here, go tell him to take that horse back inside."

"But—" Yeslin cast a look at the man on the bed. He could barely see the uneven rise and fall of the man's chest under the blankets.

"Go," repeated Mr. Pevsner through teeth tight around a smile he was aiming at one of the guests. He gave Yeslin a shove in the direction of the servants' door.

Yeslin felt his throat close inward, but he dared not disobey. Giving one last lingering look at the man on the bed, he left the room filled with bright chatter.

The sound of the orchestra faded as he closed the door behind him. At one time this door had led directly to the eastern portion of the yard, which had an exterior staircase leading down to the servants' basement. But soon after arriving at this house, Yeslin had noticed the difficulty that the servants experienced in carrying their loads up the front staircase in the entrance hall, for its steps were so highly polished that the servants ran a continual risk of slipping and falling to their deaths. He had explained this to his father, who had turned so pale at this information that Yeslin, for the first time, followed the impulse to reach out and take his father's hand. His father had smiled, and had then begun making plans. The outer staircase had been enclosed with walls so that it would be warm in the wintertime, and a second flight of stairs had been built to the top storey of the house. At Yeslin's suggestion, his father had also had workers install a small pump and washbasin in the stairwell, so that the servants would not need to carry up buckets from the kitchen below.

The combined sink-room and stairwell was bright with light. It had windows facing south; the wall that held the windows was slightly deeper-set than the line of the room he had just left. Yeslin found that his eye was lingering upon the near corner of the room, at a door to an enclosed area that jutted out from what had once been the outside wall of the house. It had been a shed – once filled with gardening tools, now used as a place to store mops. In the old days it had been kept locked all of the time, for the flower gardens had been much neglected since the death of the daughter who had insisted that she be their caretaker. These days, it was left open to any servant who wished to make use of it. It was opened dozens of times a day, and Yeslin himself, during his first week at the house, had made a thorough inspection of it, in the manner of a boy curious about his new home. His father, discovering him removing the shelving one day to see what lay at the back of the closet, had turned fire-red, and for a breathless moment, Yeslin had braced himself for the inevitable. Then, amazingly, his father had laughed and had encouraged him to explore the house's attic too.

That seemed a very long time ago. Yeslin turned away from both the closet and the bright windows and made his way to the far end of the stairwell, where the washbasin lay, and where a small door to the outside had been constructed.

Autumn chill crackled through the air outdoors. Yeslin – who had spent the previous winter on the streets, dressed in nothing but a thin shirt and trousers – took no notice of the cool air. His gaze had automatically risen toward the room above the stairwell. The autumn plants in the pots hanging from its windows had not yet faded from the frost; they were still cheery shades of orange and red, like a Flame of Rebirth. The eastern sun sparkled its reflection upon the window panes.

His father had let him choose his own room. "That was my son's," his father had said, his chin quivering, "and that was my daughter's." Yeslin had chosen the daughter's room, which was filled to the brim with plants that had been neglected since her death. Only later would he learn, from the servants' gossip, that he had chosen the room where the fourteen-year-old girl was murdered. Inspecting the floor closely, he had found the bloodstains where her battered body had lain motionless after the assault.

Thereafter, he watered all of her plants regularly, muttering curses against the son as he did so.

Now he turned his attention back to his task, walking forward and pausing only when he reached the cornerpost of the house. Most of the guests had left their carriages here, in the ring of private pavement in front of the house. Yeslin spent a moment scrutinizing the carriage-drivers while pretending to stare at the foundation-stone of the house. The stone depicted a young servant kneeling to his master, or an obedient son kneeling to his father – Yeslin had never been sure which.

None of the carriage-drivers were familiar to him. Even before the murder, Yeslin had heard, his father had entertained few guests, preferring to reserve his time for his business and his family. Now, through the months of grieving, his father had lost all interest in the business, which was handed over to his brother for supervision. All of the housemaster's thoughts, all his hopes, all his love had gone to the one remaining member of his close family, whom he had not known existed before the previous spring.

Yeslin raised his face to gaze beyond the carriage-drivers to the great stone building lying at a distance upon a high stone mount, as though it were nothing more than an outcrop. Within the natural stone foundation upholding the palace, it was said, lay the infamous Eternal Dungeon. Prisoners were sucked into its cave mouth and eaten, never to return to the lighted world.

The palace was different. Its grounds were always alive with richly dressed men, women, and children. One dark evening during the previous winter, when the air had been so cold that Yeslin was sure that he would die before the night was through, he had stood at the back gates of the palace, pressing his face against the icy bars and trying to imagine what it was like to live among wealth. In the moonlight, he could see the ornamented windows of the palace, while in the rocky area directly behind the palace, a thin stream of smoke arose, seemingly from the rocks themselves.

The guards had chased him away then, but he had returned many times, and whenever he visited, whether during the day or during the night, he

had seen the same grey smoke coming out of the ground. He could see it now, a faint blurry line against the palace.

"It's a Flame of Rebirth, no doubt," his father had said when he asked. "Even the greatest men and women of this world must die." He had smiled at Yeslin, and then his smile had turned into a hacking cough that left him breathless.

Slowly Yeslin walked round the front of the house. A few of the carriage-drivers glanced his way with curiosity, and then returned to their stare of boredom. He paused as he reached the front door and was tempted to stand on tiptoe to look through the colored glass at the serene, beautifully decorated entrance hall that his father had always allowed him to travel through, provided that he did not enter the front parlor, which was reserved for the guests that never came. Now the entrance hall was barred to him as well, by order of Mr. Pevsner, who seemed convinced that Yeslin would wreak havoc in any room he entered. Yeslin found himself wondering at what point Mr. Pevsner would feel confident enough of his power to turn the commoner boy out of the house.

He was suddenly tempted to simply open the front door. A doorbell would ring clearly through the house, the butler would come and see him, and Mr. Pevsner, learning of his disobedience, would act accordingly. Everything would be over, and he would no longer have to sleep at night with nightmares of what was to come.

But then the man on the bed would be alone. Resolutely, Yeslin turned away and made his path round to the western side of the house.

He could hear more clearly now the commoners' singing, and he began humming his own ballad – not too loudly, for Mr. Pevsner had banned all singing from the house, despite the fact that his father liked to hear music when he was ill. Yeslin had worked carefully on his song, using as its base *The Ballad of the Dying Prisoner*. It had always bothered him that the ballad should end with the death of the lonely prisoner. In his own version of the tale, he had engineered a rescue of the prisoner from the Eternal Dungeon, with the help of a sympathetic guard. He had struggled over the question of whether anyone would believe that a guard in the Eternal Dungeon could be sympathetic and had also spent much time trying to

decide whether the prisoner and the guard should be friends, or merely love-mates. In the end, he had made them twins who had been separated at birth, one going to live with a commoner family and the other going to live with a high-born family. Not content with this innovation, he had added a second twist: rather than have the ballad be an ordinary tale about the bond of love between the prisoner and his rescuer, he had arranged for the other prisoners to rise up in revolt against their oppressors. At the end of the ballad, having slain the Seekers and regained their freedom, the prisoners and the one sympathetic guard joined together, arm and arm, to bring their mighty power to the streets of Yclau's capital, where they might free other men and women who had been treated unjustly.

It was a vision that pleased Yeslin, though he knew that it was likely to elicit laughter from many of his listeners. He smiled now as the tune thrummed in his throat, so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice where he was until Rab hailed him.

"Did that old gas-pipe throw you out?" the carriage-driver asked, pausing to wipe sweat from his brow with an arm that was already covered with water.

Yeslin gave a worried look back at the house. The window was still open, though he could not see whether Mr. Pevsner was near. Lowering his voice in the hopes that Rab would take the hint, he said, "Mr. Pevsner sent me to ask you to take the horse back into the stable, please."

Rab looked aghast. "The stable? How the bloody blades am I supposed to wash him there? The dirt floor will turn into a puddle of mud!"

"That's what he told me to say," replied Yeslin with a shrug. He looked round to see whether the other carriage-drivers were listening to this conversation, and found that they were.

Rab noticed this as well and scowled at the nearest carriage-driver, who grinned back. "Better learn to hold your tongue, man," the other carriage-driver said cheerfully. "I've heard tale that your new master has already turned seven servants out onto the streets."

"Six," growled Rab. "And he isn't my master."

"Seven," said Yeslin softly. "He turned out little Gillie this morning."

Rab looked as though he would roar at this news, but instead he glared at the other carriage-driver, picked up his bucket, and pulled at his horse's rein. "Come on," he told Yeslin, who began winding the nearby hose back onto its wheeled reel, pushing the reel as he went.

He left the hose reel beside the outside pipe that his father had installed the previous summer, at his suggestion, and hurried to catch up with Rab. The old man had already turned the corner into the spacious back lawn that held the vegetable gardens and the chicken coops and the stable for the carriage horses. Servants were bending over the coops, fetching eggs and occasionally glancing, as the servant-girl had, toward the Autumn Commoners' Festival, their expression wistful.

Yeslin, pausing against a vine-pole to catch his breath, looked over toward the celebration. The morning was still young, and the sun had just begun to rise over the roofs; the frost sculpture looked as fresh as it had on the previous night, when it was made. It was in the traditional shape: a circle to symbolize the turning cycle of rebirth for the old year and for the human souls who had died during the past year. Children were clustered around the ring, looking as though they would like to have touched it, but none of them dared mar the sacred symbol.

A woman broke away from the crowd of adults that was drinking and was listening to a man sing a song. She reeled her way up to the ring, gouged out a bit of the ice, and plopped it into a mug. She promptly handed the mug to the small girl she was dragging alongside her, and said something sharply to the girl. The girl looked up, but apparently she did not respond quickly enough for the woman's satisfaction. The woman, gripping the ring to keep herself from falling over, hit the girl on the head with her fist. The girl fell onto her bottom and burst into tears.

Yeslin felt his hands curl into balls. He stood motionless, willing one of the other commoners at the festival to notice and come rescue the girl, but the adults were absorbed in the singing, and the children seemed disinclined to interfere with the heavy-handed woman. The girl picked herself up and stumbled over to a nearby barrel, where she carefully filled

the cup with the traditional hard cider before bringing it back to the woman. The woman gulped down the contents swiftly.

Yeslin, recollecting himself, turned away before his birth-mother should sight him. He had not expected to see her here, so far from home, but that was careless of him. His birth-mother never passed up a chance for a free drink. The only wonder was that his birth-father was not here as well.

By the time Yeslin caught up with Rab, the carriage-driver had already wiped down the horse and returned it to its stall. He was sitting now in the hayloft, chewing on the end of a bit of hay. Yeslin climbed up the ladder to join him.

As he flopped down onto his stomach beside the carriage-driver, he said, "Someone should do something."

He was not entirely sure which event he was speaking of, but Rab drew his own conclusions. "Who could?" he replied simply. "Who'd risk being turned out?"

"Manfred," Yeslin suggested.

"Oh, aye. He's mid-class; the Menservants' Guild would care for him if he lost his position without cause. But the rest of us . . . One word from any of us, and we'd be out the door, with no letter of recommendation to find us a new position." He glanced at Yeslin, half buried in the hay. "It's mighty cold on the streets in winter."

Yeslin nodded without speaking. They were both silent for a while, looking down upon the horses' stalls and watching the warm steam from the horses' mouths rise into the air. Finally Yeslin said, "He's ruining everything. The household was fine till he came along and took over."

"Mm." Rab chewed on his hay a minute before saying, "Well, it's been fine since your arrival. Before that . . . The master was mighty down before that. Needed someone like you to pull him up from his bad spirits."

Yeslin cradled his face in his arms to keep it from being scratched by the hay. "Do you think he's dead?" He did not bother to say the name. He never said the hated name.

"No," replied Rab decisively.

Yeslin raised his head to look at him. "You seem very sure."

"I know— Well, never mind what I know. I know he's not dead."

It was hardly the first time Rab had teased Yeslin with mysterious hints, and once again Yeslin had to force himself to keep from asking the questions he was sure Rab wanted him to ask. His father hated gossip.

He thought again of the murderous son. If the son was not dead, he was imprisoned, being tortured to death. And lying, perhaps? He had lied at his trial, trying to shift the blame for his murder onto his father. Would he lie to the Seekers? And if he did, would the Seekers believe him?

Suddenly restless, Yeslin half-climbed, half-slid down the ladder. Sighing, Rab followed slowly. As he did so, Yeslin said, "There ought to be a way to stop such things from happening. It happens in other households too. Servants being sent away without cause."

Rab snorted as he reached the ground. "Boy, has it taken you this long to figure that out? It happens all over the city. Dockyard workers, manufactory workers . . . any man or woman without a guild to fight for him gets turned out, and none of us can do a thing about it. It's the way things are."

"It's *wrong*!" cried Yeslin.

"Aye. Well, there's lots of wrongs in this world that can't be righted. Do you think we can bring back the master's daughter from death? Or the master's son from those torturers that have hold of him now?"

"He deserves to be tortured," Yeslin replied.

Rab sighed again as he leaned against the half-doors that led to the outside. "Aye, well, you can say that, but I'll tell you one thing: If the two of them were here again, the master wouldn't be dying. It's grief as much as illness has brought him to this state. I thought, when you came . . . But he wants to die. He wants to travel on to a new life, where he won't remember what happened and feel the pain of it."

Yeslin folded his arms and looked out upon the yard, and upon the street beyond, empty but for passing carriages. In a tight voice, he said, "I've tried."

He felt Rab's arm fall across his shoulders. "You've tried," the carriage-driver agreed. "And no one could have done a better job than you have. The master's not dying for want of love, that's for sure. But she was his daughter, and he . . he was the master's first-born. His heir."

Rab's voice had taken on a different note now, a more hushed sound, with a catch at the end of his sentence. Yeslin was beginning to look over at him to see what his face held when a carriage caught his eye. It had been moving swiftly, but it parked itself on the side of the street just as quickly, on the corner of their lot. The carriage had four horses rather than two, and on its top sat both a driver and a man in a soldier's uniform. Yeslin could not see who sat inside the carriage, for the window shade was drawn, but he could see the gold seal upon the carriage's black body.

"That's the royal seal!" he cried, leaning over the half-doors to see better. "I saw that seal on the gates of the palace!"

"Aye?" Rab sounded singularly unimpressed. "That'll be the prince, then. He and the master shared the same tutor when they were young; the master sometimes got invited to the palace, back in those days. The master has never forgotten the prince, after all these years." He sounded as though he thought the prince was receiving an honor by visiting here.

Yeslin was now practically falling over the doors, trying to see the inhabitant of the carriage. Rab spat out his hay to say, "You'd best go back indoors. If the prince is there, you should be by the master's side. So the prince will remember you were there, in case anything should happen after."

Yeslin stared at Rab, impressed with his quick wit. "I wouldn't dare," he said. "He's the *prince*."

"Last I heard, princes were mortals, like all the rest of us," said Rab in a matter-of-fact manner. "This one's an old man. Probably would appreciate seeing that your father's being cared for by a bright-eyed boy like you. Go

on, make sure that barrel of wind inside doesn't take your rightful place. Let the prince know that your father values you."

Yeslin was still trying to think up arguments against Rab's absurd plan, but the carriage-driver had opened the doors and pushed him forward with as much determination as he used with his horses. Yeslin, unable to resist the idea of being in the same room as royalty, ran toward the house, past the squawking chickens and the startled servants.

Only as he reached the corner leading to the east side of the house did he look back. A man had emerged from the carriage, clothed from head to foot in royal black, but his back was to Yeslin. He was talking to the soldier, and his head was hidden by the hood of his cloak.

Reassured by this sign of the prince's generous condescension toward his inferiors, Yeslin turned and began to race back to the death room.

He slid into the room unnoticed. All was as it had been when he left: the sprightly tunes continued, the chatter remained high, and his father lay motionless on the bed. Mr. Pevsner was leaning over his father again. His mouth dry, both from the run and from the anticipation of what was to come, Yeslin began to edge his way toward the water pitcher on the nearby sideboard. But his way was suddenly blocked by a man two heads higher than himself.

"May I fetch you something, sir?" His father's butler and valet, Manfred, spoke coldly.

Yeslin, feeling his throat tighten, shook his head quickly and backed away. He had gotten along well with all of the servants since his arrival here, for he had never tried to act as though he were anything other than what he was, a commoner boy who had received the charitable hospitality of a high-born gentleman. But Mr. Pevsner, upon his arrival, had seemed determined to ensure that a wall was built between the servants and the high-born members of the household. His father had still been continuously aware of his surroundings at that time, so Yeslin had found himself on the side of the wall belonging to the household's gentlemen. Since that time, the servants' animosity toward him had risen.

More than once, Yeslin had wished he could cross back over to the side of the wall where he belonged, but his father was on this side. He looked again at his father, who was breathing deeply and taking no notice of what was happening in the room. His face seemed sunken, like that of a corpse; his hands did not move upon the bed-cloth.

The sound of a door closing snatched Yeslin's thoughts away. He turned his head and saw that Manfred, who must have left the room during the interval, had returned from the entrance hall. He walked swiftly over to Mr. Pevsner, who was still staring intently at the man on the bed, and leaned forward to speak softly in his ear.

Mr. Pevsner's face changed. He looked sharply at Manfred, who nodded to confirm whatever he had said, and then Mr. Pevsner hurried toward the door to the entrance hall, taking no further notice of Yeslin's father. The butler, without need for instructions, came forward to the crowd and began announcing the early end of the death vigil.

Yeslin ignored his speech. What he saw was more important: Mr. Pevsner was gone from the room. Moving as unobtrusively as possible, so as not to attract the attention of Manfred, Yeslin went over to his father's side. Tentatively, he reached out and touched his father's hand.

His father's eyelids flickered, then rose. The sick man stared unseeing at the ceiling for a moment, and then turned his head toward Yeslin. He smiled.

Yeslin felt a smile rise unbidden to his face. He squeezed his father's hand, all his thoughts of royalty swept away. His father continued to smile weakly at him; then he appeared to notice that some commotion was taking place elsewhere in the room.

He opened his mouth, and Yeslin leaned forward. In a rasping voice that was nearly drowned by the clatter of the departing musicians moving their instruments, his father asked, "Is he here?"

Yeslin did not have to enquire as to whom he meant; his father had asked this question many times before. "No, sir," he replied. "He hasn't come, sir."

"'Father,'" the man in the bed corrected quickly, raising his head slightly. "I told you, you're to call me 'Father.'"

Yeslin smiled again. "Father," he whispered.

His father sighed and let his head fall back onto the pillow. "He must come," he said in a faint voice as the last of the guests was ushered out. "I know he'll come. I sent a message to him."

Yeslin hesitated before asking, "Who sent the message for you, Father?"

"Why, Harden, of course. He handles all my correspondence now."

Yeslin was silent. If Mr. Pevsner had been told to send a message to the Eternal Dungeon, Yeslin was quite sure that such a message had never been delivered. It was obvious enough why it would not be in Mr. Pevsner's best interests to send the message. And Mr. Pevsner's best interests determined what events took place in this household.

Finally Yeslin said, "But he's still imprisoned, Father. He can't come here, and perhaps he can't send a message."

"Oh, he'll come." His father's voice, for all its faintness, was firm. "He's such a clever boy. He has always found ways to do things. Of course I've never told him how clever he is. That would make him prideful. But he's quite the cleverest boy you can imagine. He'll find a way to come."

Yeslin tried to think of how to respond to this, but already his father's eyelids were drifting shut. As Yeslin gently pulled his hand away, he looked up and realized that the room was empty.

He had assumed that Manfred would sweep him away when the servants were sent out, but apparently Manfred had decided that he dare not go that far without orders from Mr. Pevsner. No doubt he had gone to request such orders. Yeslin could hear Mr. Pevsner's voice now, approaching the room. Yeslin got up, backed away from the bed, and tried to figure out where he could hide himself so that he would not be removed from the room.

It was too late. The door opened, and a figure entered. It was not Mr. Pevsner; nor was it the butler. It was the figure in black, cloakless now. His

head was turned toward the man on the bed, though whether his eyes were focussed on the man was difficult to tell. Yeslin could not see his eyes.

The figure in black was a hooded Seeker.

CHAPTER THREE

For a moment, the torturer did nothing but look down upon the man in the bed. His uniform was very plain: just black trousers and a black shirt and the black hood that covered his head. From where he stood frozen, Yeslin could see that the front part of the hood was unmarred but for two eye-holes. What lay behind these – whether anything lay behind these – Yeslin could not tell, for the Seeker stood in the shadows.

Then the Seeker walked forward with measured steps, like a guard before a funeral pyre. He reached the bed and leaned over, saying something so softly that Yeslin, just a few feet away, could not hear him.

His father's eyes flew open. He stared up at the Seeker, his face turning pale, and the torturer spoke again softly. His father's breath rushed in, and he began to choke on whatever reply he had been about to make. His hands were now clutching the bed-cloth. The Seeker waited, stooping dark over the dying man.

Suddenly, without knowing he had moved, Yeslin was beside his father. He pushed the Seeker back with a shove, shouting, "Go away! Leave my father alone!"

The Seeker took two involuntary steps back, then stopped and straightened. Close as he was, Yeslin still could not tell whether the torturer had eyes. The Seeker's eyeless gaze remained weighted upon him, crushing all breath from Yeslin's chest.

Then he felt his arms pinioned painfully behind his back, and he gave a cry. From behind him, Mr. Pevsner said breathlessly, "I'm sorry, sir. I'll see that you aren't disturbed again." He pushed Yeslin forward, so quickly that Yeslin could not see whether the Seeker turned his head to watch them go, or whether his attention had returned to the man on the bed.

Within seconds, they had reached the entrance to the stairwell. Mr. Pevsner released him, thrusting Yeslin forward as he said, "Go downstairs. Stay there."

"But—"

The door slammed closed before he could finish speaking. Yeslin heard the key turn in its lock. He stood motionless, trying to hear what was taking place beyond the door, but the room was as silent as death.

He looked behind him. The door leading to the steps to the servants' quarters was shut, and Yeslin could hear no sound from abovestairs. Evidently Manfred had been given instructions to keep everyone below until the Seeker was gone. Yeslin put his hand on the knob to the belowstairs door. Then, abruptly, he turned away and made his way over to the door of the closet.

He worked quickly, but as quietly as possible, pulling off the shelves and piling them to the side of the closet. When he was through, he carefully closed the closet door; then, groping in the dark, he pulled away the panel at the back of the old garden shed.

He often wondered whether anyone besides himself knew about the panel. Surely his father did not, or he would have spoken of it when he found Yeslin exploring the closet. Had the dead daughter known of it, perhaps? It seemed like the sort of secret that generations of this household's children would know of, and it pleased Yeslin to think of the girl using this secret entrance to sneak in and out of the house, as her fancy wished.

The hidden entrance did not lead to the death room, which until a few weeks before had been the house's dining room. Instead, the entrance led to the deserted front parlor. Yeslin, ducking his way through the panel, paused to kneel on the floor and wipe his hands free of the dirt he had acquired while removing the shelves. His way was blocked by a straight-backed piano, which stood catercorner from the rest of the furniture in the room, hiding the corner of the front parlor and the panelled entrance to the old garden shed. The dust in this corner was an inch thick; Yeslin guessed that no one had tried to move the heavy piano for years, perhaps decades. He was not sure that he could move it himself; nor had he tried to do so on the one previous occasion when he had visited this room, before his father had forbidden him to come into the front parlor. But if he could not move the piano, he could climb over it, and he was sure his father would understand why he had disobeyed orders. After all, his father's life lay in peril.

He was thinking of this, still kneeling upon the dirt and trying to formulate a plan to save his father, when he heard voices in the entrance hall. His breath halted. He looked round quickly, seeking a spy-hole from his position, but he could see none; the piano, straight-backed, rose like a wall before him.

Then he heard a door squeak, and he knew he was trapped.

Mr. Pevsner's voice said, as he entered the room, "You can see for yourself, sir, how ill my brother is. We have placed him downstairs so that he can be within easy reach of visitors, but we dare not move him again. The healer fears that my brother will die if he leaves his bed. He could in no way survive a journey to the Eternal Dungeon."

"Sir," replied the Seeker in a soft voice, "you seem to be under a misapprehension. I do not possess the power to arrest men; my duties are confined to searching prisoners who have been sent to the dungeon by the Queen or by the lesser prisons. I am not here to arrest your brother."

"I see." Mr. Pevsner's voice was closer now. Yeslin, crouching in the dust, tried to crane his neck to look up, but he could see nothing other than the ceiling, and the chandelier hanging from it, and a bit of the wall holding the hearth.

There was a clink, and then a gurgle, and Yeslin knew that Mr. Pevsner must be pouring a drink. "In that case, sir, would it be too bold of me to enquire as to your intentions here?"

"I am here on behalf of your brother's son. —No, thank you, I do not drink on duty."

There was a silence, and then Mr. Pevsner said, "He is alive, then."

"Most certainly." The Seeker sounded matter-of-fact, as though the possibility of his prisoner dying had not occurred to him. "He is eternally confined. Hearing, however, of his father's imminent death—"

"How did he hear of that?" Mr. Pevsner asked swiftly. There was a clink, as he evidently set down the glass.

A small pause followed, and then the Seeker said, "I believe he received word from a member of this household."

"*Which* member?" asked Mr. Pevsner sharply.

"I regret, sir, that I am not at liberty to say." The Seeker's voice was mild in comparison to Mr. Pevsner's. He did not sound in the least like a torturer.

"Never mind," said Mr. Pevsner slowly. "I think I know who it was. He has hinted more than once . . . But no matter. You were speaking of your prisoner, sir; forgive my interruption."

"The prisoner," continued the Seeker, "hearing of his father's imminent death, wished to send a message to him. Since it was not clear whether your brother would be well enough to read a letter, I agreed to convey the message to him myself."

"That is generous of you, sir." Mr. Pevsner had taken on a more genial tone, no doubt as a result of the Seeker's mildness. "As it happens, it is unlikely my brother will die any time soon. We have held the death vigil now because the healer says that death is certain, but we are unsure as to whether it will take weeks or months for my brother to die. It seemed best to hold the vigil now, when my brother was still in a state where he could appreciate his neighbors' signs of respect. So there was no need for you to trouble yourself to carry an urgent message – still, I will ensure that your visit is not wasted. If you give me the message, I will be glad to convey it to my brother."

"I fear that is not possible," the Seeker replied softly. "The message is for your brother's ears alone. However, if you wish to assist me, you could answer some questions."

There was a silence, followed by footsteps. Yeslin had just managed to slip himself into a seated position, but now he froze, terrified to move. Mr. Pevsner had come into view. He leaned against the mantelpiece, his arm brushing a pedestalled vase that sat above the hearth. "I am at your service, sir, as much as I can be," he replied in a light voice. "You understand that, being my brother's lawyer, I am honor-bound by my oath to my guild not to divulge private information from my clients."

The Seeker ignored this statement of reservation. "Well, then, Mr. . . ."

"Pevsner," the lawyer supplied.

"But you are his brother?"

"His step-brother, sir. My father was remarried after my mother's death, to a widow whose husband had died at war and had left no provision for his wife and son. My brother Auburn was still a baby at the time."

"So you are the eldest son?"

"By a few years."

"Yet your father left his house and business to your younger brother?"

Mr. Pevsner's fingers, which had been drumming upon the base of the pedestal, stopped abruptly. He said in a frigid voice, "I am sorry, sir; I do not follow your train of thought."

"I was wondering how well acquainted you were with the events that took place in this household two years ago."

"Ah." Mr. Pevsner's hand relaxed, and he resumed his drumming. "Not very well acquainted, to my sorrow, sir. I moved away from the capital when my brother's children were still young and had not visited this house for many years at the time that my nephew committed his murder."

"You were not in touch with any of your family members?"

"Only by letter." Mr. Pevsner made it sound as though he still lived in the days when letters took months to reach their recipients.

"So you were not aware of what your brother was doing to his son."

Yeslin had to place his hand rapidly over his mouth to stifle a cry. Fortunately, Mr. Pevsner did not sight the movement; he was staring with narrowed eyes at the Seeker. He said carefully, "I am not aware that anything of an unlawful nature took place between my brother and his son."

The Seeker said nothing. The silence stretched, and then stretched further, like thread upon a distaff. Finally Mr. Pevsner added, "Of course I was

aware that there was tension between my brother and my nephew. I very much regret that I was not present to assist my family during those many years. As soon as I received word of the tragedy, I hurried home to be of as much help as I could."

"And that is when you took over your brother's affairs." The Seeker's voice was so neutral that he might have been discussing the weather, but Yeslin saw Mr. Pevsner stiffen again.

"At my brother's request, I took on some of his burdens," he said. "I am his lawyer, after all."

"Then you will know of his will."

"His will?" Mr. Pevsner's hand tightened with a clutch upon the pedestal of the closed vase, and for a moment it looked as though he would tip it over.

"Your brother's will. When he dies, who will inherit the house and business?"

"I regret, sir, that my oath as a lawyer does not permit me to divulge such information." Mr. Pevsner's voice was cool.

"Then you will inherit the house and business?"

"Sir!" Mr. Pevsner drew himself up to his full height. "I do not know what your intentions are in asking such a question, but I assure you that I have engaged in no actions contrary to the ethics of the Lawyers' Guild. I do not permit myself to serve as lawyer to my brother in any matter which would benefit myself."

"I see." The Seeker's voice was reflective. "Well, if that is the case, then your oath cannot prevent you from speaking of your brother's will. If you benefit from it, then it must have been drawn up by another lawyer. Unless I am wrong, and you are not the recipient of your brother's fortune?"

Mr. Pevsner's mouth opened, and remained open. Yeslin, crouching as low as he could behind the piano, could see the dilemma as clearly as the lawyer. If Mr. Pevsner refused to speak, then the Seeker would take this as an admission that Mr. Pevsner was his brother's heir and had engaged in crookery with his brother's will. But if Mr. Pevsner spoke . . .

It came to Yeslin suddenly that he was witnessing a Seeker at his work. It had not occurred to him until now that Seekers might have ways to tear the truth from their prisoners, other than through torture. He resisted the impulse to raise his head high enough to see whether the Seeker's eyes were as deceptively mild as his voice.

Mr. Pevsner, defeated, said in a wooden manner, "My brother's heir is my nephew."

"Oh?" There was a faint skepticism to the Seeker's voice; Yeslin could not tell whether it was play-acted. "But your nephew is eternally confined."

Mr. Pevsner sighed heavily; the sigh sounded genuine. "I have advised my brother to change his will to reflect the reality of the situation. He will not do so. My brother is . . . very tender-hearted. He is reluctant to acknowledge that his son is lost to him forever."

"And so, since the will has not been changed, the house and business will go to his next nearest kin – would that be you?"

Mr. Pevsner stiffened once more. After a moment he said, in an equally stiff voice, "That is for the magistrates to decide."

"And his other son?"

"What?" Mr. Pevsner seemed momentarily disconcerted. He stared with furrowed brow at the Seeker.

"The boy I met just now. He referred to your brother as his father."

"Oh, him." Mr. Pevsner relaxed. "He is nothing. An urchin whom my brother brought home from the streets. My brother is very tender-hearted." This time there was the faintest note of disapproval in the words.

"He is an orphan, then?"

"Yeslin? Sweet buds, no – his parents are alive and well."

"But you say that he was living on the streets."

Mr. Pevsner shrugged. "He chose to live there. His parents are drunkards and beat him. Or so he says." The skepticism in his voice was less well

masked than the Seeker's had been.

"And so your brother has adopted him?"

Mr. Pevsner gave a short laugh. "Adopted him? Adopted a commoner boy?"

"Yet he calls your brother 'father.'"

Mr. Pevsner sniffed. "It pleases him to do so. My brother indulges him."

"I see." Nothing could be read in the Seeker's voice. Yeslin wished again that he could see the man's eyes. "Then, if the will has not been changed, your brother has made no provision for the boy after his death?"

Mr. Pevsner merely shrugged his reply.

"What will happen to him after your brother dies?" the Seeker persisted.

"I suppose he will return home," Mr. Pevsner said indifferently.

"To his parents who beat him?" The Seeker's voice remained mild.

"Or he will find work. He is only two years short of his majority; he could easily pass himself off as an eighteen-year-old – or simply seek one of the many jobs available to boys."

There was silence. Yeslin was beginning to see how the Seeker used silence as his weapon, drawing men's confessions through it. He wondered whether Mr. Pevsner recognized this.

The lawyer's hand tightened once again on the vase. He said sharply, "I fail to understand your interest in this matter, sir."

"I was just remembering," the Seeker said softly, "what you said before, about your regret at not being present to help your family."

"I am sorry, but I do not understand what relevance that remark has to this discussion."

"No," the Seeker said, yet more softly, "you would not."

Mr. Pevsner, who was beginning to turn red in the face, opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the Seeker said in a changed tone, "Thank you

for your assistance, sir. If it is not of trouble to you, I would like time alone for a while, in order to recover from my journey and to prepare myself for my meeting with your brother."

"Ah." Relief at the end of the questioning was clear in Mr. Pevsner's face. "Yes, of course. You understand, sir, that, as my brother's lawyer, I must be present at any meeting between himself and a man of governmental authority."

To Yeslin's surprise, the Seeker simply replied, "I understand. If you will allow me time to prepare myself . . ."

Mr. Pevsner's eyes narrowed, as though he suspected the Seeker of wishing to attempt some betrayal, but the Seeker did not speak further, so the lawyer said, "Of course, sir. You may remain here; no one will disturb you unless you pull the bell-rope, in which case my brother's butler will come to serve you. I will leave you for . . . half of an hour? Or perhaps an hour?" He apparently received a nod to the latter question, for he added, "I have work of my own to do in any case. I need to speak with one of the house's servants."

His voice had turned grim, and Yeslin felt his stomach flip. He remained motionless, though, as Mr. Pevsner moved away, out of sight of him. "I will return, then, at the end of an hour," the lawyer said. "It would be best, sir, for you not to disturb my brother until then. The shock of a stranger's entrance could irreparably damage his remaining health."

"Of course," said the Seeker in his mild voice. "I assure you, I will not disturb your household by entering the entrance hall. I agree that it would be wrong to inflict a stranger's presence on your brother during his illness."

"Then if you will excuse me, sir . . ."

The door of the front parlor opened and closed. Yeslin waited to hear the front door of the house open, but the sound of Mr. Pevsner's footsteps walked in the opposite direction, and Yeslin realized that the lawyer did not wish to use the front door. The sound of its bell could be heard as far as the servants' quarters and would bring Manfred up to investigate.

Another door opened; Yeslin knew that it must belong to his father's bedroom. He heard the very faint sound of metal scraping as Mr. Pevsner locked the door from the inside. A minute later the door to the stairwell creaked.

Yeslin jumped in place and looked behind him, but the closet door, though slightly ajar, was still safely closed. He heard Mr. Pevsner pass through the stairwell; then the door to the side yard opened and closed. And then there was silence.

Yeslin tried to remember whether he had heard the lawyer lock the servants' door to his father's bedroom. If Mr. Pevsner had not . . . He sat for a moment, trying to figure out whether he could depart from this room without being heard. Then he looked up and caught a glimpse of black.

The Seeker was walking toward his corner. Toward the piano.

o—o—o

Yeslin had no time in which to decide whether it would be safer to remain motionless. He was too busy scrambling backwards through the open panel, back into the safety of the closet.

He had forgotten the shelves leaning against the side of the closet. He tripped over them, falling backwards against the closet door, which thunked with the sound of his head hitting it, and then sprang open with a bang. Another loud thunk followed as he fell onto his back, sprawled across the floor.

He raised his head, which was ringing from the blow. He was just in time to see a pair of black-trousered legs descend swiftly from the air onto the floor between the piano and the panel. Yeslin realized that the Seeker must have used his hands to vault over the piano, but he had no time to think about the oddness of this, for he was too busy trying to scramble backwards with his hands and feet and bottom, in a desperate effort to escape the black-hooded carnivore.

His pain-filled head thunked against a solid barrier once more; he had reached the washbasin and was trapped against it. He saw the Seeker

double over to make his passage through the panel. Then, within a few steps, the Seeker was in the stairwell, looming over him.

Despite the brightness of the light streaming through the windows, the Seeker's eye-holes were still blank. He seemed as tall as the palace walls from where Yeslin sat, pressed against the washbasin. The Seeker had no weapons on his belt, but Yeslin had already witnessed how weapons could be superfluous for the torturer. He felt his heart hammering in his chest, and he could not seem to breathe. But he heard himself say in a trembling voice, "You can have the house and business. I don't want them."

For a moment there was silence. Then the Seeker raised his hand, and Yeslin shrank into himself in preparation for the blow.

The blow did not fall. Instead, the Seeker put his fingers to the hood and peeled it back over his head – not the entire hood, but the front part, which was apparently made of a separate cloth from the rest of the hood. The Seeker's face came into view.

The right corner of the Seeker's mouth was lifted slightly, in the suggestion of a smile. "You're quicker of wit than Uncle Harden," said the Seeker.

Yeslin did not reply; he was too busy staring. What struck him first of all was how young the figure before him was. He had imagined that the Seeker would be in the prime of his manhood, perhaps thirty years of age. Yet the young man standing before him could not be more than four or five years older than Yeslin. He was also quite the best-looking youth that Yeslin had ever seen, with flawless white skin and deep blue eyes and brown hair touched with gold.

For so many months now Yeslin had imagined what this house's murderer looked like. In all his imaginings, it had not occurred to Yeslin that Elsdon Taylor would look like his father.

Then he reminded himself that Mr. Pevsner also looked like his father. Tension entered into Yeslin's muscles; the Seeker must have sensed the slight movement, for the faint smile disappeared from his lips. He looked down at Yeslin, still looming over him like a black bird of prey. Finally he said, "I'm not here for my inheritance. I—"

A door behind him banged, and the Seeker quickly pulled down the face-cloth of his hood. A voice behind him said, "Son?"

Yeslin craned his neck to look, but his father was not gazing at him. The focus of his attention was the Seeker, who had turned swiftly to face the man clutching the doorpost. Yeslin's father was in his thin nightgown and was standing in bare feet; the nightcap was slipping off his head. He said in a quavering voice, "You're here . . ."

"Sir—" said the Seeker, but he had no chance to speak. Yeslin's father stumbled forward, and the Seeker, apparently in an effort to keep the man from falling to the floor, came forward and put out his hand.

But Yeslin's father seemed to gain strength as he came forward. He bore the Seeker backwards, as though on a wave, saying, "You're here! I knew that you would come. And it's all here – everything that's yours. Your room. The house. The business. I've kept it all for you. It's all yours now."

"Sir . . ." The Seeker was now standing against the outside wall of the closet, but his father took no notice, crowding closer to the Seeker, as though he might escape.

"You'll stay, won't you?" his father said in a pleading voice. "You won't go away again? You can have anything you want. It will be like it was in the old days, son. . . ."

He was chest-to-chest with the Seeker now, yet the Seeker was making no attempt to push him back. His hood was still down, and he had flattened himself against the wall; he was as motionless as a butterfly pinned to a card. But from where Yeslin sat on the floor, he could see that the Seeker's hands had formed into fists.

Yeslin was trying to figure out how he could rescue his father from those fists when the door beside him opened, and he heard Rab say, "Why, sir, what are you doing out of bed? You ought not to be on your feet, sir – no, not at all."

"I—" His father seemed suddenly flustered and took a step back. "I – I must talk with him—"

"But you can do that from your bed, sir," Rab stated firmly, walking forward. "Here, let me help you, sir. You ought not to be on your feet, sir, not when you're unwell."

His father made inarticulate sounds of protest, but Rab took him decisively by the elbow and steered him away from the Seeker, who made no attempt to interfere. Yeslin came to his senses and scrambled up from the floor. He hesitated, but the Seeker remained where he was, against the wall to the closet, so Yeslin hurried past him into his father's bedroom.

When he got there, he found that Rab had already laid his father out upon the bed and pulled the covers over him. His father's eyes were closed again. Rab, sighting Yeslin, came forward and met him in the middle of the room.

"What's that Seeker doing here?" he hissed.

Yeslin hesitated, looking past Rab toward his father. "He's here to talk," he said finally.

"Well, get rid of him! He's disturbing the master."

Yeslin wondered how Rab envisioned him expelling a hooded Seeker from the house. Then he remembered something more important. "Rab," he whispered, "Mr. Pevsner is looking for you. He knows that you've been corresponding with . . . with Elsdon Taylor."

"Aye?" There was no surprise in Rab's voice as he spoke, but his shoulders sagged. After a moment more he said, in a dull voice, "Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later." He looked over at Yeslin and gave him half a smile. "Now, don't you worry. I'm a skilled driver, and trained drivers are in demand. I'll be able to find a new position in no time."

Yeslin sucked at his lower lip. Handsome young trained drivers were in demand, he had no doubt, but not carriage-drivers the age of Rab. And without any guild to care for him. . . . *It's mighty cold on the streets in winter,* Rab's voice whispered within him.

"It's not fair!" Yeslin said passionately, though he remembered to keep his voice low. "You've worked here all your life, since you were a boy! Mr. Pevsner has no right to turn you out!"

"Who'd stop him?" Rab said simply. He gripped Yeslin's shoulder, as though steadying him, but his next words were nothing except, "I'd best go pack my things before he finds me. I don't want to be here to listen to his farewell lecture."

Yeslin, who had seen Gillie reduced to tears that morning during Mr. Pevsner's speech of dismissal, did not reply. Rab squeezed his shoulder again and said, "I'll come say goodbye before I leave. But till then, you get rid of that Seeker. You've got to be the one to take care of the master now." He stepped past Yeslin, moving as slowly as he had when climbing down the ladder.

Yeslin watched until Rab had disappeared into the stairwell; then he walked over to the bed. His father was breathing unevenly, but no more so than he had earlier that morning. Yeslin watched him carefully for a minute. Then, reassured by the signs of continued life, he made his way back to the stairwell.

The stairwell had now reached the high brightness of mid-morning, with light slipping in through the small windowed door leading to the outside and pelting in with full force through the southern windows. The room was empty but for the Seeker, who had his back to Yeslin. He was standing before the washbasin, scooping water up to his face. His hands froze as the door squeaked behind him. Yeslin said, "It's me."

The Seeker moved again, reaching for a towel. He carefully wiped his face dry before turning round to Yeslin. With the morning light falling full upon it, his skin seemed whiter than before; his eyes were as deep as river-water. They indeed looked mild.

"Thank you," he said in his deceptively quiet voice. "I couldn't speak to Rab. I'm not permitted to let anyone except my family know what I've become."

Keeping a careful distance from the Seeker, Yeslin asked, "If you're not here for the money, then why are you here?"

He tried to make his voice as belligerent as Rab's would be in such circumstances, but failed. He found himself wondering whether he would be better off cultivating a mild tone, as the Seeker did.

The Seeker did not respond at once. His gaze drifted toward the southern windows, lingering there. Finally he said, without moving his eyes back to Yeslin, "Among other things, to see Sara."

Yeslin, whose hands were behind his back, gripped the doorknob tightly. He stared gaping a moment, wondering how he should interpret this odd turn of events. Then he felt a blade of chill enter him. While on the streets last winter, he had heard a rumor that one of the Seekers had gone mad. Was it this Seeker? Had he left the dungeon only because his insanity had driven him forth to wreak destruction elsewhere?

But in the same moment, the Seeker added softly, "Do you know where she's buried?" He still did not move his gaze from the windows.

Yeslin let out his breath slowly. "She's in the front parlor," he replied.

The Seeker's gaze snapped toward him, and Yeslin realized belatedly that his reply must sound as mad as the Seeker's previous enquiry. He said quickly, "In an urn. On the mantelpiece."

The Seeker did not seem reassured by this additional information. "In the *front parlor*?" he said. "Sweet blood, what is she doing there? Why hasn't Father buried her?"

"He plans to!" Yeslin replied, swift as always to his father's defense. "He has talked about it. It's just . . . I think he doesn't want to think about it. Sir," he added belatedly. The word stuck in his throat, as it did when he applied the title to Mr. Pevsner, but he dared not anger the Seeker. Not with his father lying vulnerable in the next room.

The Seeker's gaze drifted away again, southwards. "In the front parlor," he said softly. "No one ever goes there. She'd have hated that."

Yeslin said nothing. He took a few steps forward to see what the Seeker was gazing at in the yard, but no one was standing within the fence, and the carriages had disappeared from the drive at the front of the house. All that could be seen was what could always be seen: a distant bit of the street, the well-made houses beyond it, and, rising above all else, the Queen's palace, marred only by a thin line of smoke, barely visible.

So softly that he might have been speaking to himself, the Seeker said, "We used to go to the Parkside crematorium together, to visit our mother's tomb. Sara always liked it there. She said it must be comforting to be surrounded by the ashes of other people who had entered into their rebirth. Once she heard that commoners are sometimes buried in a communal ash pit, and she thought that was even better. . . . We have a crematorium in the Eternal Dungeon. It has, not one Flame of Rebirth, but hundreds of them: hundreds of candles kept lit by the Seekers and guards in memory of the prisoners who have been buried there within recent memory. I have thirteen candles there. That's how many of my prisoners have died."

The cold blade that had touched Yeslin before plunged into his gut. He had almost forgotten, amidst the Seeker's softness, what this man was. But now it all made sense. Of course Elsdon Taylor had become a Seeker. What other work was appropriate for a murderer? Yeslin supposed that the Seekers must pick carefully among their prisoners, selecting the ones who would be most talented at destroying other prisoners.

He looked again at the thin line of smoke, rising out of the rocks below the palace, never-ending. He felt as though he were choking on it.

Then the Seeker added softly, "I'll be buried there one day. All the Seekers are, because we've all taken oaths to remain eternally confined within the dungeon. There have been two Seekers and three guards buried there since I arrived. They were all killed by prisoners, or died of injuries they received from prisoners long ago. Another Seeker is close to death now."

Yeslin did not know what to reply. Finally he said, "Guards are buried there too?"

The Seeker nodded without removing his gaze from the smoke of the Flames of Rebirth. "Anyone who has worked at the Eternal Dungeon at any time can be buried there. We have an enormous pit for the ashes – centuries will pass before it is filled. We've even honored requests for burial from people who had visited our crematorium at some time in their lives and were so impressed by it that they wished to end their lives there. There's nearly someone in the crematorium, Seeker or guard, singing prayers for the dead. The High Seeker sometimes has to come to the crematorium to drag away whichever Seekers and guards are lingering

there, because they're on duty. Once you get there, you can't forget the souls of those who have died because of you. . . ."

His hands were suddenly fists once more; he leaned toward the windows, like a man yearning for his love-mate. Yeslin stood uncertainly in the center of the stairwell. He wondered what his father would do in this situation, and then he knew.

"Sir," he said, his voice an imitation of his father's, "would it please you to sit down?"

The Seeker turned his head slowly toward Yeslin. His face was drawn into tight lines now, and his skin seemed even paler than before. He gazed at Yeslin for a long moment, and then nodded.

Yeslin looked round, but of course there was no chair in this place. He wondered whether he should invite the Seeker to vault over the piano again so that he could seat himself in the front parlor. Finally, in desperation, Yeslin gestured toward the flight of stairs leading upward. There were chairs in his own room, though it made his skin creep to think of this man re-entering the place of his murder. Perhaps he should take the Seeker into his father's old bedroom, which was presently inhabited by Mr. Pevsner's belongings. Yeslin guessed that Mr. Pevsner would be hunting Rab for a long time.

The Seeker followed his gesture, moving toward the staircase. He had placed his hand upon the stair-rail when he froze, looking upward. Yeslin hurried over to his side and tilted his head to see who was standing upstairs.

No one was there. Manfred must have pulled the servants hastily from their cleaning chores upstairs, for the door to one of the rooms was still open – not Yeslin's room, but the room opposite it. From where he stood, Yeslin could glimpse the furniture he had seen on rare occasions, when the servants came into the room to dust: a bed, a chair, a desk, and, sitting on the desk, a neat pile of schoolbooks.

He looked over at the Seeker, who remained motionless. The Seeker's chest was rising and falling rapidly, and Yeslin could hear the heaviness of his breath. Yeslin stared at him, uncomprehending. The murder had taken

place in Sara Taylor's bedroom; why should the sight of his own bedroom affect Elsdon Taylor like this?

The Seeker gripped the stair-rail hard, his knuckles white against pale skin. His face was growing whiter by the moment, and his breath seemed to have stopped. Suddenly Yeslin realized that the Seeker was about to pass out.

He grabbed hold of Elsdon Taylor's arm, felt the man's body sag against him, and managed to turn him round in time that the man sunk onto one of the steps. Unbidden, he pushed Elsdon Taylor's head down between his knees, and he heard his father's son begin to gasp, sucking in breaths of air. Yeslin, with his hand still on Elsdon Taylor's back, turned his head to look up the stairs. A chair, a desk, some books – and just at the edge of the doorway, barely visible, a bed.

A bed. Something important had been said about that bed earlier in the day; Yeslin strove to remember. Beside him, the gasping continued. Elsdon Taylor's hands tightened and released on his legs over and over, like a man trying to grasp a slippery life-rope.

Yeslin stared up at the bed. It looked much like his own, made of solid wood with finely carved legs. He scrutinized the bed-leg he could barely glimpse, as though it might bring him a clue. It was all brown – all but for a grey line that striped it. He followed the line of grey: it snaked its way up onto the corner of the bed, disappearing under the bedcovers. He supposed that the maid who swept this room had not noticed it, or she would have removed whatever it was that was tied to the bed.

Tied. Then Yeslin remembered.

He suddenly felt weak himself. He sank down onto the step beside Elsdon Taylor. There was barely enough room between the wall and his father's son for him to sit. He could feel clearly now the tremors that ran through Elsdon Taylor's body, wave after wave of shuddering. The young man had raised his head high enough to bury it in his hands.

Yeslin put his hand lightly onto Elsdon Taylor's back. He was barely aware of the man beneath his touch; he was seeing again in his eye the grey rope tied to the bed-leg, snaking its way under the covers. Surely there must be

another reason for that rope. Perhaps Elsdon Taylor had placed it there himself, intending to tie his sister to his bed before murdering her. And Elsdon Taylor was only reacting this way because he was remembering the murder.

Yeslin thought this; but he heard his voice say, "So it's true."

Elsdon Taylor's fingers parted; he peered at Yeslin sidelong, his eyes shimmering. Then he closed his eyes again. He nodded wordlessly.

Yeslin did not speak again. He could hear faintly below them the voices of servants and the clash of dishes from the death vigil as they were cleaned. The yard was silent, and the clattering of passing carriages on the street was steady. Elsdon Taylor seemed unwilling, or unable, to emerge from the burial ground of his hands. Finally Yeslin nudged him.

The fingers opened again; the eyes stared blindly at the clean handkerchief that Yeslin proffered. Slowly, Elsdon Taylor straightened up. He took the handkerchief, wiped his face dry, blew his nose, and returned the handkerchief to Yeslin with a wordless nod of thanks.

Yeslin, licking his dry lips, pocketed the handkerchief and waited. Elsdon Taylor's gaze had turned away from him. He was staring past the stair balusters toward the thin line of smoke rising from the rocks.

Yeslin said in a voice that was tight, "Your mother . . ."

Elsdon Taylor said softly, his gaze on the smoke, "I think my father pushed her during an argument, and she fell down the front stairs to her death. I've never been entirely sure, though. I was just four at the time, and I only saw her body afterwards."

Yeslin had once happened across his youngest sister lying unconscious on the floor after his mother had beaten her in a drunken rage; he could imagine all too vividly what Elsdon Taylor had seen.

His heart was beating hard now. After a minute's silence, the young Seeker turned his gaze toward Yeslin and asked quietly, "Has he harmed you?"

"No!" responded Yeslin with automatic swiftness. Then, more slowly, "No. No. I . . . I think he wanted to hit me a few times. But he stopped himself

from doing so."

"I'm glad," Elsdon Taylor said, his voice still quiet. "I was afraid, when I saw you here. You look so much like I was at your age: eager to defend others, unable to defend yourself. . . ."

Yeslin felt warmth enter into his face, accompanied by a strong feeling of shame. He was not what Elsdon Taylor thought he was. Yeslin had defended his father without thought, and on no other occasion had he ever tried to defend anyone. It had not occurred to him to do so.

Elsdon Taylor's gaze had drifted away again, as though pulled by an invisible string. Yeslin asked in a low voice, "Have you come to arrest him?"

Elsdon Taylor shook his head but did not remove his gaze from the smoke. Finally Yeslin asked, "Why do you keep looking back toward the Eternal Dungeon?"

Elsdon Taylor removed his gaze from the horizon. From the look in his eyes, it appeared that it had cost him something to do so. "A friend of mine is ill there."

Yeslin was silent, tracing patterns in their conversation. Then he said, "The Seeker who's dying?"

Elsdon Taylor flicked a glance at him, but after a moment he nodded. "It's not certain whether he will die. I was the one caring for him. Without me there— I'm worried about him."

Yeslin said slowly, "Why are you here, then?"

"I received word that Father was dying."

"But . . ." Involuntarily, Yeslin looked up the stairs again. From where he sat, most of the bed was hidden from view, but he could see that the desk chair was pushed back, as though its inhabitant had recently risen. "But . . . he beat you. And – and killed your mother. And . . . he wanted you to be tortured to death." Yeslin stumbled over the words; he still could not believe them. But Elsdon Taylor believed this had happened; that was clear from the way his face tightened at the final words. The young man looked

away abruptly, and for a moment his breath was heavy again. Then he steadied himself and looked back.

"Do you believe in rebirth?" he asked softly.

Yeslin stared blankly at him. "Of course."

"Then when a man dies, without acknowledging to himself that he has committed terrible wrongdoings against others . . . Do you believe that he will be reborn?"

Fear clutched at Yeslin suddenly, like a drunken man. He swallowed, and swallowed again, and said finally, "That's why you're here? To help Father turn to rebirth?"

Elsdon Taylor nodded.

"But . . ." This time Yeslin rose from his seat to look at the bed. The rope there was pulled so tight that it looked as though it were at the breaking point. He tore his gaze away finally and stared with wordless bewilderment at Elsdon Taylor.

"It's my duty," Elsdon Taylor replied softly to his silent enquiry. "My duty not only as his son, but as a Seeker. That's our primary duty as Seekers: to help guilty prisoners prepare themselves for their rebirth. To lift from them any self-deception they may hold about what they have done, and to allow them the opportunity to express their regret so that, if the magistrate sentences them to execution, their rebirth will be swift."

"But he beat you. . . ." This time, the words seemed less strange. Yeslin swallowed and tried again. "You said you weren't here to arrest him. He's not a prisoner."

"No," Elsdon Taylor said quietly. "He's not. And that's my fault."

Yeslin furrowed his brow in puzzlement, and Elsdon Taylor responded by rising from the step. Without looking back at the scene above, he swung himself round the last of the balusters, as a boy might, and took the few steps necessary to bring himself back to the southern windows. Yeslin followed him to the windows, noticing for the first time that the Seeker

was no taller than himself. They stared together at the line of smoke marking the location of the Eternal Dungeon.

After a while, Elsdon Taylor said, "The Eternal Dungeon is the best place in Yclau for criminals to receive an opportunity to confess their crimes, but it's not the only place. If my father had been arrested for my mother's death, or for what he did to me, he might have had the chance to acknowledge to himself what he had done. But I was misguided as a boy; I thought it was my duty to remain silent to everyone about what he was doing. And then I killed Sara, and in doing so, I stripped my father of the opportunity to be searched for his crimes. I was the only witness to what he had done, and no magistrate would believe the word of a murderer. So my father is free – free in the way that the lighted world sees it, but still imprisoned by his crimes. And unless I can find a way to help him acknowledge his fault, he'll remain imprisoned after death, unable to be transformed and reborn into a new life."

Elsdon Taylor laid his hands flat upon the window panes, as though seeking to break through a barrier. His voice remained soft as he said, "The Codifier understands. He's the only man in the Eternal Dungeon who has the power to give me permission to leave there. Ordinarily I'd be bound to remain in the dungeon, both by my sentence and by the oath I took as a Seeker. But I told the Codifier that I believed it was my duty as a Seeker to try to turn my father to rebirth, because it was my fault he hadn't been arrested for his crimes. So the Codifier gave me permission to visit my father for a brief while. In case I could be of help to him, as to my other prisoners."

Yeslin's mind had wandered back to the image of the tight rope bound to the bed. Had his father also thought that he was helping his son to rebirth by beating him? Yeslin strongly suspected that Elsdon Taylor had done nothing more than become what his father was, torturing his prisoners as his father had once tortured him. The only difference was that the Seeker's torture received the approval of the Queen and of all high-born members of Yclau society. Yeslin felt again the terrible helplessness he had often felt upon contemplating all the evil forces that pervaded his world.

Then he looked at Elsdon Taylor, noting again the taut expression. There was another difference between the Seeker and his father; Yeslin was sure

of it. It came through in every word that Elsdon Taylor spoke and in every movement of his body. Perhaps it was only that the Seeker, lighting candles for his dead prisoners, was willing to acknowledge what he had done.

And meanwhile, in this house an ash-urn lay on the mantelpiece, pushed back in memory.

"I thought I'd have the strength to do this." Elsdon Taylor's voice was no more than a whisper now. "It has been two years; I've had time to heal. But now that I'm here—"

"Wait!" Yeslin said spontaneously. His mouth raced ahead of his thoughts; he had to think a moment as the Seeker turned puzzled eyes toward him. Then Yeslin said, "Wait here. Don't go anywhere. Just – just wait." He paused the mote of time it took Elsdon Taylor to nod; then he sped off.

He slowed at the door, opening it cautiously. The room seemed very large with the vigil guests gone. Yeslin could remember it as he had first seen it, on the morning after his father had brought him home: a vast room, filled with odd bits of furniture and mysterious eating implements. Now, stripped by Mr. Pevsner of its original furnishings, the room looked stark.

His father was awake. He had managed to pull himself into a sitting position and was struggling to swing his legs over the bed. Closing the door behind him, Yeslin hurried forward. His father, seeing him, looked relieved. "He's still here, isn't he? He hasn't gone?"

"He's still here," Yeslin assured him. "He'll be in to talk with you in a minute. . . ." As he spoke, he tucked the bedcovers over his father, settling him back against the headboard. His father, flushed in the face from the effort to rise, twitched nervously.

"Oh, but I must speak to him now!" he cried. "I must make him understand! I was so angry at him, you see," he explained to Yeslin, who had sat down on the bed beside him. "I was so very angry after what he did. It was only later that I realized it was my fault. I raised him the wrong way. I beat him too much. . . . Or I didn't beat him enough. . . . I've never been quite sure which it was." He looked over at Yeslin, who was now

frozen in place, unable to move. "I thought, with you, I'd try not beating you. It worked, didn't it?"

His voice, pleading like a child's, broke Yeslin's paralysis. "Yes, sir," he whispered. "It worked."

He expected his father to correct his use of the formal title, but his father merely reached over and squeezed his hand. "You understand," he said. "I knew that you would. And you see, don't you, why I have to give him back his place? It's because I wronged him. I must give him back what he had before. You don't mind, do you? That I'm giving him what I gave to you?"

He peered with worried enquiry at Yeslin, as though sensing that he was demanding a great deal. Yeslin felt as though the full weight of the Queen's palace was crushing his chest, and he could feel the sobs rising in him, seeking to escape. But he kept his hand clasped around the sick man's and said, as gently as Elsdon Taylor had when speaking of his father, "I understand, sir. But, sir, if you're sorry for how you treated your son, couldn't you tell him that? I think he would want to know."

"Yes!" The sick man embraced this suggestion. "Yes, that's what I must do. I'll tell him I'm sorry I beat him too much. Or that I didn't beat him enough —"

"No!"

Auburn Taylor gaped at him, and Yeslin realized that this was the first time he had ever contradicted the housemaster. He made his voice gentle again as he said, "Sir, if you say that to him, you'll only confuse matters. Don't you think it would be better simply to tell him that you're sorry?"

"Yes," said Auburn Taylor slowly. "Yes, you're right. He's a clever boy, but he has always been a bit slow to understand certain things. I need to keep things simple, so he'll understand."

A soft knock sounded at the door. The door opened minutely, and Elsdon Taylor looked in. He had not pulled down his hood; his naked face was still pale. Yeslin rose to his feet, gesturing the Seeker in. Then he looked back at Auburn Taylor.

Auburn Taylor seemed to be struggling for breath. He waited until his son was standing at the foot of his bed before he said, "Son, I want you to know that I'm sorry. For . . . for the way things were when I raised you. And for being angry at you afterwards. That was wrong of me."

For a moment Elsdon Taylor remained looking down at his father, and Yeslin felt the same uneasiness that had touched him when the Seeker was at his work with Mr. Pevsner. He wondered how much Elsdon Taylor was seeing.

But what the Seeker saw was apparently enough, for he stepped forward and, without hesitation, bent onto one knee beside the bed.

"Sir," he said softly, "I forgave you long ago for what happened, and I hope that you will also forgive me for the wrongs I did to you and to my sister."

Auburn Taylor's face flinched at the word "sister," but he reached out and took his son's hand. Yeslin, watching carefully, saw Elsdon Taylor tense as his father touched him. But not until he was standing on his feet again did the Seeker carefully remove his hand and say, "Your apology means much to me, sir, but I have learned in the Eternal Dungeon that expressions of regret are not enough. It is necessary for the guilty person to seek to make reparation for what he has done."

Yeslin, suddenly worried, looked at Auburn Taylor to see how he would respond to this. The housemaster licked his lips, glanced at Yeslin, and then said, "How . . . What sort of reparation do you want me to make?"

Elsdon Taylor was silent a minute. Then he said softly, "I murdered my sister."

This time Auburn Taylor's pain was clear. He turned his face, like a man who has received a blow. Elsdon Taylor, as though he had not witnessed this sign of distress, continued, "I cannot bring Sara back to life. But family means more to me now than it ever did when I was a boy, for I will never again be able to live in the lighted world, and my family is my strongest tie here. Sir, if you love me and wish to make reparation for what you did, then adopt Yeslin and give to him what you would have given me, so that I may still have family after you have gone."

Auburn Taylor's expression cleared of its pain. He stared with wonder at his son, then at Yeslin. "Yes . . ." he said slowly. "Yes, this is right. It's right that you should have a brother to make up for—" His voice ended on a choke, and for a minute there was silence, but for the heaviness of Auburn Taylor's breath. Yeslin hurried over to his side and felt Auburn Taylor take his hand. His father peered up at him; the tears were clear in his eyes.

Yeslin looked at Elsdon Taylor. The Seeker seemed to have drawn into himself; his gaze was blank, seeing something beyond this room. Yeslin could guess what it was. With a sudden impulse – such impulses seemed to be taking over Yeslin's life now – he leaned forward and whispered in his father's ear.

His father's eyes widened as he spoke. When Yeslin had finished, his father looked up at him, seeking confirmation of what he had spoken, and Yeslin nodded. He squeezed his father's hand, hoping that he would not have to instruct him once more.

He did not have to. His father, clearing his throat, said, "Son . . . Elsdon, your brother tells me that you have come here despite the fact that you have an ill friend in the Eternal Dungeon who requires your care."

"You mustn't worry about that, sir." Elsdon Taylor's voice was quiet.

"Nonsense!" Suddenly his father seemed to gain vigor. He sat upright in his bed, glaring at the Seeker. "How many times have I told you, Elsdon, that your highest duty is to care for your family and friends? I understand that you came here because you did not know I had anyone to care for me. But now that you know I am cared for" – he patted Yeslin's arm – "you must return to your friend, who has greater need of you than I do."

Elsdon Taylor did not reply immediately. His gaze drifted over to Yeslin, standing beside his father. Then he said in a quiet manner, "Thank you, sir. I very much appreciate your understanding. It is true that I would not have been able to stay with you for long in any case; my leave is only for three days. Since it seems you will be well for some remaining time . . ."

"You go back to your home." His father waved a hand airily, as though dismissing a boy who was neglecting his duty. "I'll be fine now."

"Yes," said the Seeker softly. "I can see that you will be."

Yeslin looked at his father. His father's hand was trembling in Yeslin's grasp; Yeslin did not think that the return of his eldest son had made any difference to Auburn Taylor's physical health. But there was a strength in his eyes that had not been there during all the time Yeslin knew him. A faint smile played on the housemaster's lips. He looked at this moment very much like his son.

Yeslin turned back toward the Seeker, only to find that he was gone; the door to the entrance hall was just closing. His breath caught, and he looked at his father. "Father, may I . . .?"

"Yes, of course." His father gave another airy wave of his hand. "You run along. I'll simply . . ." He looked around for an excuse to dismiss Yeslin. "I'll read. Yes, that's what I'll do, I'll read. Where is Harden, by the way?"

"He'll be back soon," Yeslin replied, his mind crowding with too many thoughts at once. "He's searching for Rab."

"Oh?" His father lost interest. "Well, run along, do. Don't idle your time, son." And with that, he pulled a book from his bed-stand and buried himself in its pages.

Yeslin nearly did himself injury in his haste to run back through the closet and climb over the piano. He managed to overcome the barrier without harming himself or the instrument, and then he grabbed the object he wanted and ran. He reached the door to the entrance hall just as Elsdon Taylor pulled his cloak from the hook in the hallway. It was without hood, Yeslin saw; the hood he had noticed before was that of the Seeker's uniform. The Seeker raised his hand to pull down his face-cloth, and then noticed Yeslin standing at the open doorway to the front parlor, cradling the urn.

"Here," said Yeslin, holding out the closed vase to Elsdon Taylor. "You take it. He'll never notice it's gone, and if he does, he'll be glad you've taken it. You can bury her in your crematorium and light a candle for her there."

Elsdon Taylor took the urn from him slowly, his gaze fixed upon the small object. Finally he lifted his eyes to look at Yeslin. He said quietly, "I can't leave the dungeon, but I can receive letters, as well as visits from my family. If you would like to write me, and perhaps visit some time . . ."

Yeslin felt a smile spread across his face. He nodded and then added, "Don't worry about Father. I'll make sure he doesn't hurt anyone."

The Seeker smiled. It was the first time he had given a full smile, and Yeslin's breath escaped him at sight of the serene beauty of that smile. Elsdon Taylor leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. The kiss was feather-light, like the touch of a petal.

Then the face-cloth of the hood came down and his brother left, bearing the urn of their murdered sister.

The bell from the front door chimed loudly. Yeslin heard a stirring from below, and he knew that Manfred would be there soon to investigate who had passed through the door. He knew that he should hurry back into the stairwell before he was found where he should not be. But his brother had left the door ajar, and faintly through the doorway Yeslin could hear Mr. Pevsner's voice speaking sharply, accompanied by another person's soft gasps: the sound of a man trying not to cry.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs, then the sound of his father greeting Manfred cheerfully, then the sound of the door from his father's bedroom opening as Manfred entered the entrance hall. And then he made up his mind.

Without looking Manfred's way, Yeslin walked into the entrance hall and through the front door, slamming it closed behind him. The bell chimed, high and loud. Yeslin smiled grimly. His father could wait; an injustice was taking place, and Yeslin was the only one who could stop it.

As he walked forward, he raised his voice in *The Ballad of the Liberated Prisoner*.

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. . . For it was at this juncture in the history of Yclau's dungeon that a fateful meeting occurred which would change the future of the queendom of Yclau. I refer, of course, to the meeting of sixteen-year-old Yeslin Bainbridge with a Seeker.

We do not know which Seeker young Bainbridge met, nor what words were exchanged during that meeting. Indeed, some historians have expressed doubt that such a meeting actually occurred, given that Seekers were almost never allowed to leave the Eternal Dungeon. The most likely explanation is that Bainbridge met the Seeker in the small stretch of palace corridor where Seekers were permitted to travel in order to give evidence about prisoners in the courtrooms. In any case, it is impossible to deny that Bainbridge, who until that time had lived a quiet and unassuming life, underwent a startling transformation.

Of that meeting, Bainbridge would later write: "As I spoke with the Seeker, he granted me a vision of a different world than the one in which I had been living – a world in which evil was not endured passively but was fought against, regardless of the consequences for oneself."

Every schoolchild knows the result of this meeting: of Bainbridge's decision to establish the queendom's first guild for commoners. The Commoners' Guild, the most important trade union in our queendom's history, would battle passionately against the higher classes' complacent oppression of the working class and eventually create an Yclau where, if class divisions were not erased, they were at least questioned.

But all of that lay in the future in the autumn of 357. Around the time that Bainbridge was meeting his destiny, an equally serious crisis was taking place in the Eternal Dungeon, where the High Seeker was struggling to retain his sanity. At this point it seems best to switch to the narrative of Weldon Chapman.

> Although I had helped to care for the High Seeker in his illness, the greatest responsibility lay with Mr. Elsdon Taylor, a young Seeker of outstanding gifts in both his professional life and his private life. I have already said that the High Seeker found it exceedingly difficult to establish close relations with others around him. Because of this,

> Mr. Taylor was the High Seeker's only intimate friend, and this intimacy played a central role in preventing the High Seeker's condition from worsening.
>
> In the ninth month of 357, at a time when we all feared that the High Seeker was returning to madness, Mr. Taylor received news that required him to take a leave of absence from his work as companion to the High Seeker. Only the highest dictates of duty could have persuaded Mr. Taylor to leave, for he and I both feared that the temporary loss of his presence would cause the High Seeker to break down altogether.
>
> Since the news Mr. Taylor received was so urgent that he was forced to leave immediately to make arrangements for his new work, I was delegated with the duty of informing the High Seeker of Mr. Taylor's departure. After I had told the High Seeker in his private quarters, he was motionless for a long time – so long that I began to fear that the worst had happened. Then, for the first time in many days, he began to speak to me, in halting sentences and garbled words that I could barely understand. Gradually I realized that the High Seeker was sharing such confidences as he had never before granted to me, nor, I believe, to any person other than Mr. Taylor. I realized then that the High Seeker, knowing that he could not survive this crisis without the assistance of a friend, had chosen to take the only course of action left open to him and was establishing the bonds of friendship with me.
>
> I have no doubt that the High Seeker undertook this difficult step, not for his own sake, but for the sake of Mr. Taylor, for he must have known the grief and guilt Mr. Taylor would have felt if he had returned to find that the High Seeker had entered into madness due to his absence. It was one of many occasions on which I witnessed the High Seeker sacrifice his personal comfort for the sake of others.

Whatever Layle Smith's initial motives may have been, this was the start of what would become the most famous friendship in the history of the Eternal Dungeon – a friendship that would, as much as Bainbridge's meeting with a Seeker, change the future of Yclau. For it was Weldon

Chapman who would write the only contemporary biography of Layle Smith and who would also preserve many of Layle Smith's letters and sayings. This information, in turn, would be used by future generations in Yclau as a foundation for the new science of psychology.

Thus a seemingly unconnected series of events – the arrival of the first woman Seeker, the temporary absence of a junior Seeker, and Weldon Chapman's willingness to help the High Seeker in any way possible – would lead to the preservation of invaluable knowledge that might otherwise have been lost. It was far from the first unexpected twist in the history of the Eternal Dungeon, and it would most certainly not be the last turning point in Layle Smith's slow return from madness.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Transformation 3
A PRISONER HAS NEED

The year 358, the sixth month.

The mental illness of the Eternal Dungeon's first High Seeker has become the stuff of song and legend, with many a mother telling her child scare-tales about the "Mad Torturer." Yet the earliest songs, along with documents from the first High Seeker's time, treat with sympathy Layle Smith's lifelong battle with mental illness. Some contemporary witnesses even suggested that his talents as High Seeker derived directly from that struggle.

We are fortunate to possess Layle Smith's own account of the most serious phase of his illness, which occurred toward the end of his thirty-fourth year, and which is known to historians as the First Madness of 356. (The Second Madness occurred in the following year, 357, and did not reach the same heights of crisis.)

Layle Smith's account takes the form of a letter to the palace healer, who had evidently heard of the case and wished to know the details so that he could treat patients who were similarly afflicted. Because of the

importance of this letter, I am quoting it in full. The second sentence of the letter contains the most complete description that we possess of the nature of Layle Smith's illness.

> I do not know whether anything I tell you will be of assistance, since the circumstances of my breaking were unusual. I understand that you have been in touch with Mr. Bergsen [the Eternal Dungeon's healer], so you will know that the cause of my mind-breaking was certain dreamings that consisted of memories of deeds I committed during the unfortunate years of my youth, combined with my own imaginings. I have been in consultation with Mr. Bergsen concerning these dreamings since the time I first came to the Eternal Dungeon, but my concern was initially ethical rather than medical, for the dreamings did not become uncontrollable until the time of my breaking.
>
> The change in my dreamings came about because of a regrettable coincidence of circumstances. Certain orders I had given as High Seeker, and the consequences of those orders, caused me to fear that I would act on my dreamings. Soon afterwards, at my foolish request, I was temporarily released from my regular duties, which had always provided the main alternative to my dreamings. The dreamings began to play more and more a central role in my life, both because they provided a pleasant way for me to retreat from the pain of my fear, and also because I mistakenly believed that it was best for me to retreat into my dreamings rather than run the risk of acting out my imaginings in real life.
>
> Too late I came to realize that I had lost the ability to even partially control the dreamings – they came and went as they would. As time continued, I began to be sucked into the dreamings more and more. It was like being sucked into a strong current that threatens to drown one. Despite the best efforts of those who cared for me, I was not strong enough to be able to defy this current. I therefore placed a formal request with the Codifier [the official who had supervision over the dungeon workers in ethical matters] that I should be released from my oath to be a Seeker, since I believed that my mind

had so far deteriorated that I was a danger to the dungeon inhabitants. He refused my request, instead binding me into the care of Mr. Taylor [Elsdon Taylor, a Seeker who was evidently sharing Layle Smith's living quarters at that time].

The crisis came when the dreamings took over me entirely. I am told that, for a period of two nights and a day, I neither ate nor slept nor responded to any word or touch but simply stared blankly, lost in the dreamworld I had created.

I must tell you that it is entirely due to the efforts and skill of Mr. Taylor that I was not lost altogether. Despite the fact that he was committed at that time to assisting a difficult prisoner who was reaching the end of his searching, Mr. Taylor cared for me tirelessly during my breaking, allowing himself virtually no sleep as the seriousness of my illness increased. During the period of the crisis, I remember finding myself lost in the sweetly nightmarish world of my imaginings, knowing that I was trapped but unable to make my way past the guards who barred the doors in my dreaming. Then I began to hear a voice say over and over to me, "A prisoner has need of you. A prisoner has need of you." My vision of the real world returned, and I saw that Mr. Taylor was the person speaking.

If he had tried to plead or argue with me at that point, I think that I would have slipped back forever into the dreaming. Instead he told me, in a quite matter-of-fact manner, that I must ready myself to go to a prisoner's trial. I did this, believing, in my madness, that the prisoner was my own and that I was duty-bound to provide witness at his trial.

I went to the trial, accompanied both by Mr. Taylor and by Mr. Chapman [Weldon Chapman, a Seeker], who had been present during much of my illness. Of course, the prisoner in question was Mr. Taylor's. I sat with Mr. Chapman in the back of the judging room, listening to Mr. Taylor do his best to rescue the prisoner from the death sentence. (Alas, he was unsuccessful.)

It is hard to describe what happened next. It is not that my mind began to reason; I was too far into the madness for that. Rather, it

> was as though I remembered things I had forgotten. It came to me as I listened to Mr. Taylor that he was carrying out a duty I was neglecting. I realized that prisoners like the one he was assisting required my help too, and that it made no difference how seductively beautiful my terrible dreamings were to me. My duty required me to be in the real world of the Eternal Dungeon.
>
> After the trial, Mr. Taylor and I were able to meet privately. He told me that, with the end of his obligation to his previous prisoner, we could now work together on another prisoner as soon as I was ready to return to my duties. This news helped to bring me back to myself, and it was then that I first began to speak and to engage in other normal activities. But I believe that my return from madness occurred in the judging room, when I remembered that a Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners.

I have not quoted this letter for the information it provides on Layle Smith's mental illness (since he is frustratingly vague on the full nature of his illness). Rather, I have quoted it because, more than any document besides Layle Smith's revision of the *Code of Seeking*, the letter gives insight into the High Seeker's nature and the nature of the men and women who worked alongside him during the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon.

Any student of psychology who is reading this book will recognize the final words of Layle Smith's letter, since they are the opening words (with appropriate changes in terminology) of the *Code of Psychology*. Like Layle Smith, every psychologist today knows that he must be willing to suffer for his patients.

Yet words that appear earlier in Layle Smith's letter are of equal significance: "A prisoner has need of you." These words, which gave Layle Smith the strength to begin to pull away from his madness, explain why he and the other Seekers went to such lengths to help the Eternal Dungeon's prisoners. It was this fundamental belief that the prisoners had need of the Seekers which led many Seekers to pass beyond professional duty in assisting prisoners, and to make their assistance personal in nature.

The Eternal Dungeon's documents record many examples of this personal assistance. . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

Weldon Chapman stood in the midst of the tiny room, playing with the toy.

The "room" was nothing more than an alcove that had been separated from the main living area by means of a curtain. Within this tiny alcove, everything had been done to make the environment pleasant for a young child. There were stuffed animals, such as the lion cub that Weldon was fingering, cup-balls and rattles and a swinging horse and other such toys suitable for the cramped confines of the Eternal Dungeon. There were even books and board games appropriate for when the child grew older. Weldon stroked the battered fur of the lion cub and felt the pain within him grow.

It was annoying, therefore, to hear a knock at the door. Sighing, Weldon flipped down the face-cloth of the hood that marked him as a Seeker, then pulled open the curtain and took the few steps necessary to reach the main door of his small living cell.

"Well?" he said sharply to the man standing there.

The man, who was about twenty years in age, took an involuntary step backwards, as though he expected Weldon to order him to be lashed. He was wearing the grey-and-red uniform of a guard-in-training, and he was armed for duty, with a whip and dagger at his hips. He said quickly, "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir."

"Not at all, Mr. Crofford. I apologize for being brusque." His soothing tone came automatically, the product of years of experience with prisoners who could be broken more easily by gentle means than by harsh ones.

The guard licked his lips with a nervous twitch and held up a stack of papers pinned neatly to a board. "I brought you this, sir. We have a new prisoner, and I thought you'd want to read his records before your shift began."

"Thank you, Mr. Crofford." His voice was warmer this time. It was indeed an advantage to be able to have several hours to make sense of the frequently impenetrable prose of a prisoner's legal and medical records. "I appreciate your taking the time to bring me this. You're already on duty, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. I have so much to learn that I thought I would get a few hours' start on my studies today."

He was shuffling his feet like a schoolboy. Weldon found himself smiling even as the pain within him increased. He held open the door wide, saying, "Would you care to come in for a few minutes? I was just making myself some tea."

"Thank you, sir; I'd like that," Mr. Crofford replied with such promptness that Weldon gave the guard a long look as the man walked past him. The guard entered the apartment cautiously, his eyes flicking from wall to wall as though expecting to see chains holding dangling bodies. Then he caught sight of the alcove, with its curtain still pulled back. "Oh, I had a cub like that when I was a boy!" he cried. "May I see it?"

He was through the curtain before Weldon could say anything, his hand reaching toward the cub. At the last minute, though, the guard glanced over at the Seeker, and what he saw there made him turn pale and snatch his hand back as though he had been about to touch a hot oven.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said quickly. "I shouldn't be touching your belongings. This looks quite old and valuable."

"Old, yes, but valuable only to me." Weldon walked over and let his fingers glide over the bedraggled fur. "This belonged to me when I was a child. It was the only object I brought with me when I came to live in the Eternal Dungeon."

The guard was looking around the alcove now, gazing at the toys, the decorations, and the cradle. "This is very nice, sir. Did you put this together yourself, or was this created by Mistress Birdesmond?"

"We both worked on it." He was finding it increasingly hard to speak; his throat had tightened. He said, more gruffly than he would have liked, "Come, let's have our tea before it grows cold."

The tea was bubbling in a pot over the small stove that was one of his privileges as a married Seeker whose living quarters had originally been part of the outer dungeon, before a second door was cut through the wall to the inner dungeon. He and Birdesmond took their meals in the dungeon's

dining hall only when they wanted company. He ladled out the tea for the guard, and then invited Mr. Crofford to seat himself in a nearby chair.

"Now, what's on your mind, Mr. Crofford?" he asked as he picked up his own cup of tea.

The guard's eyes widened; then the man smiled for the first time. "I suppose it's no good to keep thoughts secret from a Seeker."

"Certainly not when you come to his quarters with the express purpose of questioning him. Do you have questions about your duties?"

"Not my duties so much as my living arrangements. I asked Mr. Boyd, since he's supervising my training. He didn't know the answer and told me to go see Mr. Daniels. I suppose I should be asking him instead of bothering you, but . . ."

Weldon gave a chuckle as he waved his hand over his tea in an effort to cool it. "Personally, I send letters to Mr. Daniels. Or smoke signals. Anything to keep me from having to walk into the dragon's den."

Mr. Crofford laughed, his body relaxing. "I know I shouldn't be afraid of the Codifier, but . . . Well, it's easier to ask you questions. You remind me of my father."

After a moment, Mr. Crofford put his cup of tea down and said, "I'm sorry, sir; I didn't mean to offend you. Would you prefer that I leave?"

"Take no mind of me. I just had a hard time sleeping last night." Weldon did his best to smile at the guard. "What is your question?"

"It's about children, sir."

After another moment, the guard rose from his seat. "Sir, I can see I have caught you at a bad time. I should let you—"

"No, no, sit. What were you going to do, bother the High Seeker with your questions? You're working under me at the moment; it's your duty to come to me with any questions Mr. Boyd can't answer. Are you wondering whether, if you marry, you'll be permitted to raise children in the Dungeon?"

Mr. Crofford nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm engaged to be married; my fiancée works in the outer dungeon. I was wondering about children, and so was a friend of mine who already has a couple of daughters and is thinking of applying for a job in the outer dungeon. I'd assumed that we wouldn't be permitted to raise children here, but since my arrival, I've seen a number of children in the outer dungeon."

"I see." He did his best to keep his voice steady. The fates knew that he had enough experience at that in his work. "Well, Mr. Crofford, the answer is different, depending on whether we're talking about you or your friend. The Codifier occasionally allows dungeon residents to raise children born in the Eternal Dungeon, provided that the parents of the children have already committed themselves to remaining residents here for a number of years. In your case, I think the Codifier would want to wait some time for an indication that your work here was more than passing employment. In the case of your friend, I'm afraid that he would not be permitted to bring his daughters to the dungeon. We had a very hard struggle deciding whether any children at all should be exposed to the dark and bloody atmosphere of the Eternal Dungeon. The Codifier's final decision was that children born in the dungeon might be able to adjust to conditions here, but that it would be wrong to bring in children who had been raised in the lighted world."

"I see," said Mr. Crofford. "So it's possible that, with the Codifier's permission, my fiancée and I would be permitted to raise our children born here, but children couldn't come here from the outside. We couldn't adopt any children, for example."

"Precisely." He wondered that his voice sounded so calm. It was a tribute to the training he had received over the years. "If you have no other questions, Mr. Crofford . . ."

The guard hastily abandoned his tea cup again and rose, saying, "I appreciate your taking the time, sir. I understand the Codifier's conclusions in this matter – though I admit it makes me curious as to whether he knows about the new prisoner."

"The new prisoner?" Weldon frowned. "Why, is the prisoner a mother who is anxious at being separated from her children?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I forgot hat you hadn't seen the prisoner yet. Here . . ." He handed Weldon the board of papers, pointing to the first line of the first page.

Weldon knew the precise moment at which his self-control shattered. Mr. Crofford took on a look of alarm akin to that of a child who turns the corner and sees a dangerous dog in his path. "Sir, I – I should go—" he stammered breathlessly.

"Yes," said Weldon. And then, his years of training rescuing him once more: "Thank you, Mr. Crofford. I appreciate your assistance. It is important for me to know when the prisoner has special needs."

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"Feel this," the High Seeker said sharply, handing the strap to the blacksmith and then pulling on the wheel until the notch in the wheel clicked into its next position.

"Hmm." The blacksmith held the strap for a moment before letting it go and saying, "It's perhaps a wee bit tighter than it should be. You have to expect a touch of variation from machine to machine, though. Making these is an art, not a science."

"We can't afford to have that much variation," the High Seeker said, his voice still sharp. "This is a life matter. We nearly had a prisoner die yesterday when the Seeker searching him took the wheel up to level five – up to what *should* have been level five – and the prisoner had an attack of the heart because his body wasn't prepared for the strain."

The blacksmith, who had gone down onto his hands and knees to examine the complex system of cogs and pulleys that led from the wheel to the strappings, stood up and dusted off his hands on his trousers, saying, "I'll do my best, sir. I can't make any promises, though."

"Ah." The High Seeker looked at the man for a moment. All that could be seen of his expression through the hood were dark green eyes, which had turned cool. Then he said, in a less heated manner, "Well, no matter. You can tell us whether we're close enough to the tension we need when we test it on you."

The blacksmith, who had been on the point of turning away, stiffened suddenly, as though he had been stabbed in the back. "Now, wait a minute," he said. "I just work to make these old machines run. Any testing you do will have to be on someone else."

"But you're an artist, you say. I know artists – you'll want to make sure for yourself that your work of art is at its highest perfection. Don't worry, sir." The High Seeker's voice took on a soothing tone. "The rack won't do you any harm if, as you say, it has only a 'touch of variation.'"

The blacksmith's breath was rapid now. He wiped his hands against his trousers again, and it could be seen that the hands were trembling. "Sir, there's no need for such tests. I'll bring my brother in to help – he works in a clock manufactory and has experience working with notched wheels like this. I'm sure that, between the two of us, we can get this one working right."

"We'll see," the High Seeker said in a noncommittal manner, and gave a gesture of dismissal. The blacksmith, retreating rapidly, nearly barrelled into Weldon, who had been standing in the doorway to the rack room during this exchange.

Weldon waited until the blacksmith was gone and the door had closed before pulling up his face-cloth to reveal his grin. "I can't believe you made him credit that. He must know that the Codifier would never allow it."

Layle Smith raised his own face-cloth; he too was smiling. "Oh, but the Mad Torturer is capable of anything. These days, prisoners begin babbling from the moment they hear my name spoken in the entry hall. I'm ready to recommend to the Codifier that all Seekers be required to undergo a spell of madness, so that all of you can have an equally daunting effect on your prisoners."

Weldon's grin had faded at the moment of the High Seeker's first words. He said quietly, "I'm glad you're able to joke about it now, Layle. It couldn't have been easy retaking your supervisory duties, knowing as you did that everyone here had witnessed your illness. Both phases of your illness."

"My reputation has always been dark." Layle knelt down to take a closer look at the wheel notches, saying, "Did I ever tell you about the *aekae*, Weldon?"

"*Aekae*? That's a Vovimian word, isn't it?"

Layle nodded as he fingered the notches. "Yes, from the old tongue, which is only spoken in southern Vovim now. The Common Speech has eliminated it everywhere else; I know scraps of the old tongue only because one of my fellow street-thieves was from southern Vovim. But bits of the old tongue survive within Vovim's ancient institutions. The *aekae* are quite ancient indeed. They're the holy men of Vovim: wandering prophets who denounce the rich and powerful for their evil deeds."

Weldon raised his eyebrows. "And how long do they survive to do this before they're handed over to Vovim's torturers?"

"That's the oddest part about it, Weldon. Amongst all the rebels and revolutionaries being racked in the dungeon of Vovim's King, the *aekae* alone are able to make their thunderous accusations with immunity to punishment. Mind you, they do live a hard life. They're men without property and live a threadbare experience, walking barefoot from town to town and eating food no better than pebbles. As you can imagine, only the poorest Vovimians take up such a life, those who are already accustomed to hardship. Yet the *aekae* hold greater power than anyone in the kingdom except the King himself, since they're the only men who can speak freely."

"And what do they speak about?"

"The gnawing of the torture-god's teeth, mainly." Layle straightened up. "Evil men being gnawed in punishment of their iniquities, men being beaten and branded and racked without cease, torture that is eternal in more than a figurative manner." He looked over at Weldon, who was struggling to control his expression, and said quietly, "Yes, the Vovimian religion is unpleasant in certain ways. The Vovimians have no such belief in rebirth as we do. They believe that a person gets only one chance to prove himself, and then he receives eternally his reward for that single life, in the form of unending joy or unending pain."

Weldon walked over to finger the straps of the rack. "I begin to see why you put such great effort into transforming prisoners' characters before they are executed."

Layle gave half a smile. "I suppose there's a bit of that childhood fear within me – a fear that any prisoner who goes to his death unreformed will lie on a rack like this forever. But that's not why I'm telling the tale. I wanted to point out how strange and wondrous it is that such good, holy men could arise out of so evil a vision of justice. It makes me believe that what we do here truly does transform evil into good."

"I see." Weldon pulled the wheel into the second notch, holding tight the strap as he did so. After a moment he let it fall, saying, "And so your madness was an evil that has brought about good."

Layle chuckled lightly. "Weldon, when I'm talking with you I cease to wonder why the Record-keeper gets headaches trying to keep you supplied with prisoners, since you break each one so quickly. Yes, that's the point of what I'm saying. My reputation matters little to me, but whether I am effective in my work matters a great deal. The darker my reputation, the more likely it is that hardened prisoners will take me seriously."

"It could not have been easy for you, though."

In the moment after Weldon spoke, he could have torn his tongue out. Been easy to undergo two spells of madness? He wondered whether, if he banged his head against the wall a few times, it would begin to function properly.

Layle simply gave a slight smile and said, "Far harder for Elsdon, I think. To be exposed to the worst of me . . . It still amazes me that he is willing to stay with me. The pain for him must have been intense."

"Well," said Weldon, groping for words of comfort and finding them in the *Code of Seeking*. "It's much as you said before about good coming from evil. Great pain, willingly undertaken, is necessary for rebirth."

"Yes," said Layle, running his hand over the wheel of the rack. "So I told the Record-keeper when he asked me whether he should assign our latest prisoner to someone besides you."

Weldon felt as though he had been examining a guard's dagger, and the blade had suddenly moved in his hand, turned round, and slid neatly into his heart. Bereft of words, he contented himself with glaring at the High Seeker.

Layle's expression was sympathetic as he turned to face the man he had been searching. "Weldon, if there were any other Seeker I could assign this prisoner to, I would. But you have better knowledge than any of the others of juvenile cases, and you speak good Vovimian. You're the best qualified Seeker to handle this prisoner."

"Not quite," Weldon replied crisply. "One Seeker in this dungeon is far more qualified than I am to handle Vovimian prisoners."

The High Seeker abruptly turned his attention back to the rack. Weldon refused to break the silence. After a minute, Layle said in a distant manner, "I'm on healing leave."

"By your own choice. The healer has granted you permission to return to work. Layle, I can understand your hesitation at returning to the heart of your old work, but it's been two years now since you searched any prisoners. You can't depend on the Codifier to wait forever."

"Yes," said Layle, still staring at the rack. "So Elsdon tells me. Every night, repeatedly. Do I need to hold this argument with you as well?"

Weldon watched Layle brush the rim of the wheel lightly, as though it were the skin of his beloved. It was a gesture that Weldon himself could never have made. He knew himself to be good at his job, and he received satisfaction from the times that he was able to help a prisoner to the rebirth of his soul. But if the Codifier were to come to him and say, "We do not wish you to work as a Seeker any more," Weldon knew, with all honesty, that his reaction would be relief. He had done good work in this dungeon, but he would not mind retiring from that work.

Most Seekers felt as he did; their work was a job, nothing more. But a few Seekers . . . Not long after Weldon arrived at the dungeon, a Seeker had been permanently injured by a prisoner and was forced to enter into retirement. The Seeker had taken his own life soon afterwards.

The event had been shocking partly because it was so rare: the Yclau religion taught that self-slayers endangered the chances for their rebirth into a new life. Weldon was grateful for that particular article of religion. If it had not existed, prisoner suicides would be far more common.

But the Vovimian religion, he gathered, had less to say against self-slaying. He stole another look at Layle. The High Seeker had not yet tried to take his life, not even in the worst of his madness. That knowledge ought to be enough to reassure Weldon. But if the Codifier decided that the dungeon could no longer afford to humor a Seeker who refused to search prisoners . . .

"There's no choice," said Layle suddenly. "The rack will have to be tested. Otherwise I won't be able to tell the blacksmith which portions of the wheel need to be fixed."

Weldon decided that Layle was right; it was high time the subject was changed. "I'll do it," he said.

Layle shook his head. He had already moved over to the bench at the back of the room and was sitting upon it, loosening his belt. "No, it needs to be me. Besides, the breakdown is undoubtedly my fault. Machines have a tendency to malfunction when I'm in the same room as them. It's as though they sense my origins." His voice had turned wry.

"Returning to that subject," Weldon said, "the prisoner's records say that both he and the victim are Vovimian. Why are we handling this case? Don't the Vovimians usually demand extradition of the accused in such cases?"

"Usually they do," Layle replied, reaching down to unlace his boots. "This time, the victim's next of kin requested that the Queen's magistrates judge the case. He claims he wishes to have the prisoner swiftly exonerated, should he be innocent, but it seems more likely to me that the kinsman is simply thirsty for immediate revenge upon the murderer."

"And the prisoner . . ." Weldon knelt down to pull off Layle's boots. "The papers said only that he was under age. I was left wondering whether he might be under age by Vovimian standards rather than Yclau. Nineteen, perhaps, or twenty . . ."

He hoped his voice did not sound too eager. Layle shook his head, though. "Twelve," the High Seeker replied.

Weldon swore briefly but pungently. "For love of the Code, I wish the Vovimians had kept this prisoner to themselves."

"You wouldn't speak such words if you'd worked in Vovim," Layle said softly, rising to his feet. "A boy that age would be lucky if his torturers merely racked and executed him. More likely he'd be passed around from torturer to torturer until he became too old to entertain them."

Weldon swore again as he stood up. "Layle, it's hard for me to understand how a land like that could have produced a civilized man like you."

Layle smiled as he undid the top buttons of his shirt. "That's kindly expressed. Most people who learn where I was born say, 'Ah, that explains it.'" He pushed up his sleeves.

Watching him, Weldon said, "Best keep those down, unless you want me to search out the wrist cushions."

"No, I mustn't have anything between me and the strappings. I need to feel the strain in as precise a manner as possible."

Weldon gave a sharp laugh as the High Seeker climbed onto the rack. "As though there were any danger that you wouldn't. Are you sure you don't want me to do this instead?"

"Quite sure." Layle lay down upon the wooden back of the rack and laid his hands high above his head.

Weldon reached forward and began to bind the strappings around Layle's wrists. "What can you tell me about Vovim that can help me in this matter?"

"Not a great deal. Both the prisoner and the victim were from southern Vovim, which is a world to itself. I told you that the old tongue is spoken there—" He stopped, his breath sucking in momentarily as Weldon pulled the straps taut around his wrists.

Weldon peered down at him. "Too tight?"

"Is that how tight you have your guards pull them for prisoners?"

"For someone of your body weight, yes."

"Then it's not too tight. As for southern Vovim . . . I told you they still speak the old tongue there. That's reflective of their culture as a whole. They're very backwards there, retaining customs long forgotten in the rest of Vovim. You know the image that outsiders hold of the Eternal Dungeon?"

"Torturers cackling with delight as they rack and rape the prisoners – the ones they don't turn into bed-slaves or put to work mining in dark pits." Weldon finished tightening the ankle straps. "I always thought that was a fair description of Vovim's dungeon and prisons."

"Not entirely, but it gives you the flavor for southern Vovim. Oh, I'm not saying that every custom there is bad. Certainly there are many good and conscientious people living in southern Vovim. But they hold onto customs that more civilized parts of the world have long since abandoned. The divide between elite and commoner is much stronger there, which is even reflected in the language. The southern Vovimians treat with greater seriousness any form of disloyalty."

"So is this a case of a commoner killing an elite, or the other way round?"

"Neither, it appears. It's a case of a son killing his father." The High Seeker's voice was more strained, for the main strap had just been tightened around his waist. "Take me up to level one and hold me there for a while," he told Weldon. "But wait – first let me tell you more about this case. . . ."

o—o—o

Since the prisoner's legal and medical records remained back in Vovim, most of the information on his background had been obtained from the victim's eldest son, Grove Hallam, who was thirty years of age and who had worked as a Vovimian liaison within the Yclau palace since he came of age at twenty-one. Though clearly shocked by his father's death, he had cooperated fully with the Queen's soldiers and had appeared to the soldiers to bear no grudge toward his younger brother. Indeed, he claimed that he

knew of the prisoner only through his father's references to the boy in his letters.

The prisoner's birth-parents, it seemed, had worked for the elder Mr. Hallam for many years. Grove Hallam had met the prisoner's birth-father once and had received the impression that the man was strongly attached to his wife. Mr. Grove (as he was called by Vovimian custom, in order to distinguish him from his father) had not been aware at the time that the couple had a son.

From his father's letters, Mr. Grove had gathered the impression that the prisoner was, at the time of the murder, twelve years of age. Mr. Grove himself had taken up his present position at the Yclau palace when the boy was three, so he had never met the prisoner. Four years after Mr. Grove left his home, the boy's father – who had been widowed at the time of the prisoner's birth – had died in an estate accident. Mr. Hallam had taken the prisoner as his *chau,* a word that the palace translator, when consulted, said meant literally "dear one." A loose translation would be "adopted son."

Mr. Grove had gone on to say that his father was quite fond of the boy and often mentioned him in his letters. A few months before, Mr. Hallam had written Mr. Grove, saying that he planned to take his *chau* with him on this, his first ambassadorial mission to Yclau, and that he was sure Mr. Grove would understand why, once he had met the boy. Unhappily, though, Mr. Grove had been busy with work since his father's arrival at the palace and had not had a chance to meet with his father or the prisoner before Mr. Hallam's death.

That was all the evidence Mr. Grove could supply on the matter, except to say that the prisoner's name was Zenas. When asked whether he knew the prisoner's last name, Mr. Grove had simply stated that, since the boy was a member of his father's household, the prisoner naturally shared the same paternal name as Mr. Grove did.

The remainder of the evidence came from the residents of the palace who had seen the ambassador and his adopted son together. All of them confirmed that Mr. Hallam seemed quite fond of the boy. The boy in turn seemed fond of his father, often smiling at him and taking his hand. The

two of them, when together, had spoken in the old tongue, and the prisoner had remained respectfully silent when his father was speaking to anyone else. He would watch his father, and at the slightest gesture would come forward and sit close to him, so that the ambassador could place his arm around him.

On the night of the killing, Mr. Hallam and the prisoner were seated in the dining hall of the palace when word was brought that Yclau's Queen must delay the beginnings of her negotiations with the Vovimian ambassador, since unexpected trouble had arisen in one of her provinces. Mr. Hallam did not seem upset at this news. Instead he said in Vovimian, "Ah, well, this gives me more time to spend with my *chau*." He smiled at his son, who smiled back, seemingly pleased by the news.

Another hour passed. The ambassador and his youngest son, who were seated at a table of their own, spoke quietly together, with the prisoner resting his hand with apparent affection upon his father's. At one point he laughed and raised his father's hand to kiss it. Both the man and the boy seemed in bright spirits, with no tension in their expressions. All of the witnesses were agreed to that.

The servers were just coming forward to clear the table when suddenly, without warning, the prisoner picked up his knife and lunged at the ambassador. Since the Queen's soldiers preferred not to supply palace guests with assassination weapons, the knife was of the dull sort, yet such was the force of the prisoner's thrust that he penetrated his father's throat with the knife. The ambassador fell to the ground, clutching at his throat as the blood poured out, but the prisoner simply knelt beside him and continued to stab, "coldly and methodically," as one witness put it. Another witness described the prisoner's expression as "icy." By the time the soldiers reached the table, the prisoner had stabbed his father a dozen times, and the ambassador was dead.

The prisoner had not resisted arrest, but he had ignored all questions put to him by the soldiers. Eventually the soldiers removed him from the scene. Upon the advice of the Queen, who had been among the witnesses to the murder, the soldiers had taken the prisoner to the Eternal Dungeon. There, it was popularly believed, no man, woman, or child could withstand the dark skills of the Seekers.

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"Five," said Weldon.

No reply came; Weldon peered over the wheel he had just turned to look at the High Seeker. Layle was lying with his eyes closed, his chest moving shallowly but rapidly. His black shirt and trousers were soaked with sweat; the skin showing under the opened part of his shirt was drained of all blood.

Weldon leaned forward and placed his fingers for a moment over the big vein in Layle's neck. Satisfied with what he felt, he let the hand drop and asked, "Shall I take you down?"

"Two minutes." The High Seeker's whisper could barely be heard.

In the corner, the water dripped down within a water-clock. Weldon glanced at the clock and began to count the drops: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . Before him he could hear the shallow gasp as Layle struggled to take in breath.

At the ninetieth drop – with a minute-and-a-half passed – Weldon took another look at the High Seeker. Without asking permission, he turned the wheel backwards. He did so slowly, letting the body adjust to each lower notch until the wheel had gone back past its original point and the straps were slack upon the rack.

Layle's chest was heaving now, but he neither moved nor opened his eyes. Weldon leaned over and asked quietly, "Shall I fetch Elsdon? Or Mr. Bergsen?"

"Elsdon is on night-leave. Don't disturb him." Layle was still speaking no higher than a whisper.

"The healer, then."

Layle made no reply; his lips moved in assent. Weldon placed his hand upon Layle's limp hand and said softly, "Don't try to move. I'll have a guard send word to him."

One hour later, Mr. Bergsen had grudgingly assented to allow Layle to be carried to the bench and propped up in the corner of the rack room.

Holding up one of Layle's limp limbs, the healer growled, "Bloody fool. I told you after last time to stop using yourself as a testing ground for malfunctioning racks. You're lucky you didn't snap any sinews."

Layle said nothing. His eyes were still closed. Weldon, who was sitting beside him to keep him from sliding off the bench, asked, "How far off alignment was it?"

"Half a level on the first four notches," Layle said in a voice that was somewhat more than a whisper. "The last notch is completely broken. You must have taken me up to twelve."

Weldon swore under his breath. Releasing Layle, the healer said, "Complete bed-rest for the next month. I don't even want you out of bed to use the chamber pot. And since you'll ignore everything I've just said, at least try to stay seated in chairs for the next couple of weeks."

Layle opened his eyes and gave a weak smile. "A realistic healer is a blessing."

"Mr. Smith, if I were an idealist, I wouldn't be working in a place like this." Mr. Bergsen stood up, reaching for his work-bag. "I'll be submitting my report on your injuries to the Codifier. I know that you'll listen to *him*, at least."

Layle sighed. "I'll confine myself to documentwork for the next couple of weeks. Thank you for your care, Mr. Bergsen."

The healer grunted, grumbled something under his breath about Seekers who treat prisoners better than they treat themselves, and left the rack room. Weldon leaned forward and said, "Elsdon will put me on that rack and will chisel out the notches till I'm at twenty if I don't call him now."

"In a while," said Layle faintly. "We hadn't finished talking about your new prisoner."

Weldon forced himself to relax back against the rough stone wall behind the bench. From the corridor outside came the sound of chatter as several guards made their way toward the exit nearest the rack rooms. One of the guards at the exit challenged them, a peremptory sound. Then came deep silence. Even without the brief interruption of a guard who had come into

the room to turn the water-clock, Weldon knew that this must be some time during the dawn shift. At dusk and dawn, all Seekers and most guards were released from their work, in order to allow the day and night shifts a chance to socialize briefly. The only men left on duty were a skeleton crew of guards to ensure that the prisoners did not get up to mischief in their cells. A prime time, one foreign torturer had sourly commented during his visit, for a prisoner breakout.

Except that few prisoners had ever sought to escape from the Eternal Dungeon. Perhaps this was because, at any given time, up to two-thirds of the prisoners were cooperating with their Seekers.

Weldon put aside such hopes. It seemed to be his curse to be assigned uncooperative prisoners. He waited until the guard was gone, and then asked, "Do you think that Mr. Grove will petition for extradition if he is dissatisfied with the magistrate's judgment?" he asked.

"Most likely," Layle replied. His voice was stronger now, and he had ceased to lean on Weldon so heavily. "If the prisoner is released by the magistrate, Mr. Grove will probably try to use international law to snatch the prisoner back to Vovim. If the prisoner receives a prison sentence, Mr. Grove may bide his time until the prisoner is released and then make his move. As a rule, Vovimians are willing to accept Yclau justice only so long as it coincides with their own view of justice. If that happens, the matter will be out of our hands – it will be for our Queen to negotiate with their King. There remains the question of the magistrate's sentence, though."

Weldon thought a moment before saying, "A judgment of innocence is unlikely?"

"In this case? I would think the odds were far against it. Since Mr. Hallam bore no weapon and showed no special interest in turning silverware into weapons, his son would be hard pressed to prove that an immediate threat existed against his life or the lives of others nearby."

"He might be able to prove that a long-term threat existed," suggested Weldon. "If so, the magistrate could find the prisoner guilty of defensive murder and sentence him to imprisonment."

Layle nodded. He and Weldon had held this type of conversation on many occasions. They could do little for prisoners who refused to repent of their crimes except to ensure that their trials and executions were swift. But part of the job of a Seeker – much to the dismay of the magistrates – was to find the best way to save their repentant prisoners from the worst punishment, given their prisoners' particular circumstances. Since the only prisoners sent to the Eternal Dungeon were those accused of death crimes, this required considerable skill on the part of the Seekers.

"If the prisoner is found guilty of defensive murder, then the lesser prisons will have to deal with him," said Layle. "Once again, the problem will be outside our province."

Weldon nodded. By tradition, the Eternal Dungeon never interfered if a prisoner was freed, transferred, or sentenced to imprisonment. In only one case would a prisoner's Seeker interfere with the process of justice.

"Death, then," said Weldon. "It's early to ask this, but if my prisoner is sentenced to execution, do you believe the dungeon should intervene?"

"That is—" The High Seeker stopped suddenly. Weldon strained to hear or see what Layle was hearing or seeing, but all he heard was a soft thump further down the dungeon, and all he saw was a very faint vibration upon the rack.

"Mr. Chapman," said Layle, "you are on duty."

"Yes, sir." He pulled his face-cloth down, purely out of symbolism; the Code did not require that two Seekers speaking in private hide their faces from one another. He was inwardly wondering how Layle invariably knew, without glancing at a clock, that a new shift had begun. It was as though Layle was the heart of the dungeon.

Which, in fact, he was, if not in a literal sense.

"That is something I wish to speak about to you, Mr. Chapman," Layle said, with only the change to formality indicating that there had been any pause in the conversation. "I had planned to send a note about this to all of the Seekers today, but I may be delayed a bit in doing so."

Weldon glanced down at Layle's limp hands and nodded. "Your note concerns something that pertains to my prisoner?" he asked.

"And pertains to many future prisoners, but yours is most likely to come to trial first. You know that the Eternal Dungeon's custom is to offer refuge to prisoners whom we believe have been unjustly sentenced to death."

Weldon gave a grim smile under his hood. "Since Elsdon Taylor was a fortunate recipient of such an offer, none of us is likely to forget. Why do you mention this?"

"Because," said Layle softly, "the magistrates have finally tired of this custom."

There was a pause. Then Weldon said, "Oh, dear."

"Yes. Matters have been heading this way for a number of years. More and more magistrates have been asking that the dungeon's claim of a particular prisoner be overruled by the Queen, and the Royal Secretary has complained that the Queen is overloaded with work at deciding such cases. Now the Magisterial Guild has entered a formal request that the Eternal Dungeon be barred from claiming prisoners who have been duly sentenced to execution."

Weldon leaned forward, forgetting that he was a prop for the High Seeker. Fortunately, Layle stayed in place. "Yclau law permits us to make such a claim," Weldon said.

"In certain narrow circumstances. But the dungeon, out of compassion for its newly reborn prisoners, has gone beyond the narrow confines of the law on numerous occasions. The Queen has ruled that, while she will continue to permit claims in cases where the law specifies such claims are allowed, she will overrule all claims that are outside the bounds of the law. She has also made clear to me that she does not wish to be bothered with such matters in the future. She has commanded me to order the Seekers to claim prisoners only in cases where the magistrates agree that the law permits it."

Weldon was silent a minute before leaning back to allow Layle his prop once more. "Will you abide by her command?" he asked softly.

"I will." Layle's reply was crisp. "The dungeon's custom of offering refuge is just that, a custom. The Code does not require it."

Weldon did not know whether to be disappointed or relieved. Layle's decision meant the unnecessary death of countless prisoners in the future: men and women who, having recognized the error of their ways, might have contributed more to Yclau society by their lives than by their deaths.

But for Layle to defy the Queen could have been just as serious a matter. It had happened before, with Layle's predecessors. Seven times in the Eternal Dungeon's history had the Queen of Yclau issued a command that went against the *Code of Seeking*. On all seven occasions the Seekers had united in defying the Queen. Since the Seekers were, in theory at least, the Queen's employees, defying the order of the Queen or her magistrates could have meant treason trials and death for every Seeker in the dungeon.

Fortunately, in each generation, the dungeon's Codifier had intervened and negotiated a peaceful solution. But the Eternal Dungeon continued to live in fear that the day would come when the Queen would outlaw the *Code of Seeking*, the book that every Seeker was vowed to uphold.

"You understand that this order applies to your present prisoner?" Layle said.

"Yes, sir. I will not claim him unless the magistrate permits me to do so." On reflection, Weldon decided that he was disappointed. Layle was known for creatively pressing the boundaries of his art; surely, Weldon thought, the High Seeker could have found a better way to handle this crisis.

As usual, he underestimated the High Seeker. Layle nodded, satisfied at Weldon's response, and said, "The magistrates have good reason to be angry. On the one hand, they have Vovimians and other foreigners overruling their judgments. On the other hand, they have the Eternal Dungeon overruling their sentences. It's little wonder that they should want back some of the power with which they are supposedly invested. If we permit the magistrates to have their way on this, I believe it may be possible to find a lawful solution that satisfies the magistrates' desire to see criminals punished for their ill deeds, as well as the Eternal Dungeon's desire to recognize that reborn prisoners have already passed through a

death of their old souls, so that they need not also pass through a death of their bodies."

"Not to mention," said Weldon, "the cases where the magistrates are quite simply wrong in their judgment of the prisoners. Which reminds me; I'll fetch Elsdon for you now." He rose from his seat.

But Layle beckoned him back with a hand that Weldon could have sworn was unable to move. "Shortly," said the High Seeker, continuing to successfully hide whatever pain he was in. "I have one more matter to discuss with you before you attend to your prisoner. It concerns Mistress Birdesmond."

Weldon felt a shaft of pain enter him and strove to ignore it. "Sir," he acknowledged the order, still standing half-turned.

"You know that Mistress Birdesmond has been in discussion with Mr. Daniels and myself concerning the completion of her training. Specifically, we have been discussing whether she should enter the final trials."

"Yes, sir." Weldon forced himself to stand motionless, glad that his hood masked his face. If Layle could hide all the pain he was feeling, then surely Weldon could manage it as well. He kept his voice level as he said, "Mistress Birdesmond and I have been in disagreement over that."

Layle raised his eyebrows. "Because you do not wish to beat and rack your wife?"

Weldon wished that Layle would stop treating him as he did his prisoners. Weldon always ended up feeling bruised after such sessions. "No, sir," he said steadily. "Mistress Birdesmond is a Seeker-in-Training, and I am in charge of her training. I realize that places certain unpleasant duties upon both of us. My reason for objecting to her desire to undergo the standard trials of a Seeker is that she is a woman. The Code forbids the torture of women."

Layle nodded. "The Codifier and I are in agreement with you, you will be glad to hear. Since Mistress Birdesmond is assigned only to female prisoners, and since her prisoners will not be tortured, we believe it would

be a shallow symbol for her to be tortured, as the Seekers who search male prisoners are at the end of their training. However, we believe that Mistress Birdesmond is correct in wanting to undergo a trial which will allow her to share the physical pain that some of her prisoners bear. We have therefore decided that, under supervision of the healer, she may undertake a fast as her trial, in order to share the suffering of prisoners who seek to starve themselves."

Weldon winced. Three of his past prisoners had successfully killed themselves through such means, this being the easiest way to commit suicide in any Yclau dungeon or prison, since both the Yclau religion and the *Code of Seeking* forbade the forcing of food or water on the ill. He made himself say, "That appears to be an appropriate trial, sir."

"Then I would appreciate it if you would convey our decision to Mistress Birdesmond the next time you and she exchange letters."

Weldon was tempted to simply nod and leave. But he was talking to the High Seeker, for whom any lie was as clear as the noonday sun. "I will write to her, sir. But I'm not sure whether she's receiving my letters."

"Oh?" Layle responded in the pale, vaguely interested voice he used when prisoners were delivering much-needed information.

Weldon resisted an impulse to kick him. "Sir," he said in a controlled voice, "if you wanted to know how matters stood between Mistress Birdesmond and me, why didn't you just ask?"

"It seemed impolite to do so," Layle replied mildly. "She has not written, then?"

"No."

"No doubt she has been busy with her family."

"No doubt," Weldon said heavily.

Time paused as Weldon waited to see whether Layle had any words of comfort to offer. The High Seeker usually knew the right thing to say. But after a moment, Layle's eyes closed, and Weldon realized why it was that Layle had nothing to say.

"Mr. Chapman," said the High Seeker in a slow voice, "I would very much appreciate it—"

"I'll get him right away, sir," Weldon said and hurried from the room to fetch Elsdon Taylor, with whom Layle need not hide his pain.

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. Crofford was standing outside the prisoner's cell when Weldon arrived there, along with Mr. Boyd, Weldon's senior day guard. Mr. Crofford's face was screwed up with such intensity as he looked at Weldon that the Seeker concluded that his senior day guard had been lecturing Mr. Crofford on his duties.

"The Codifier's watch-dogs" was what the junior guards were sometimes called, for one of their duties – their most important duty, the Codifier would have said – was to report to the Codifier any Code-breaking by the Seekers and the senior guards. Weldon had been a Seeker for three months when he was reported by his own junior day guard. What had followed from that reporting had left Weldon, perhaps unfairly, with an everlasting distrust of junior guards.

And now, he knew, he was about to enter the cell of a prisoner with whom he would be more than usually tempted to break the *Code of Seeking*. With his best effort, he managed to keep from glaring at his junior day guard. Rather, he addressed himself to Mr. Boyd. "How is the prisoner?"

"Quiet, sir." Like Weldon, Mr. Boyd kept his voice low so as not to be heard through the door, though they were both speaking in the Yclau language. "He refused to respond to us when we first introduced him to his cell."

Weldon nodded. The prisoner's refusal to cooperate might be due to simple fear, or it might be more. He would know once he had seen the prisoner's demeanor.

He resisted the impulse to look through the door's tiny watch-hole. Some Seekers were accustomed to watching the prisoner for as long as an hour before they entered the cell, but Weldon preferred to gain his first impression of prisoners from their reactions to his entrance. Instead, he cast a quick glance at Mr. Crofford. Mr. Boyd had good command of the Vovimian tongue, Weldon knew, but whether Mr. Crofford's schooldays training in Vovimian would pass muster remained to be seen. Clear communication between a guard and his prisoner was essential; Weldon would have to check at some point to be sure that this prisoner understood what Mr. Crofford was saying to him.

Weldon nodded to Mr. Boyd, who unlocked the door with such quietness that Weldon could barely hear the bolt withdraw. Mr. Crofford had his eyes narrowed, watching Weldon. As junior guard, he had the right to stand sentry at the watch-hole any time that a Seeker was alone with his prisoner, and Weldon gathered from his expression that Mr. Crofford planned to exercise this right. Feeling his back prick as though Mr. Crofford were poking him with his dagger, Weldon walked through the cell doorway.

The prisoner was sitting on the floor in the corner of the cell. This was not unusual; Weldon had lost count of the number of prisoners who had adopted pitiful positions in hopes of convincing their Seeker that they were harmless lambs. Those were usually the prisoners who physically attacked Weldon at some point. What complicated matters was that prisoners who truly were harmless lambs would also adopt this position. It took an experienced Seeker to know the difference between a prisoner who was being defensive out of a desire to destroy and a prisoner who was being defensive out of simple innocence.

As the door clicked shut behind Weldon, the prisoner lifted his head. Normally this was the point at which Weldon allowed himself to scrutinize the prisoner's appearance. Instead, Weldon found himself running through verb tables in his head, as though he needed their help in order to speak. Which was ridiculous. He had received a thorough training in Vovimian at school – had in fact been privileged with a teacher who had lived in Vovim and could give him much better training in the Vovimian language than commoner children usually received.

He forced himself to spare at least a quick glance at the prisoner. The boy was much darker than Layle; he looked like pictures of the Vovimian hell-god that Weldon had seen in his schoolbooks. He tried to remove this image from his mind. "Good morning, Mr. Hallam," he said, in the time-honored words of a Seeker greeting his prisoner. "I am your Seeker, Mr. Chapman."

The boy said nothing; nor did he stir from his place. His gaze had narrowed in a manner that reminded Weldon of Mr. Crofford. The prisoner's gaze slid over the Seeker, pausing at Weldon's hands, and finally returned to his face. Still he said nothing.

Weldon flirted with the notion that his accent was to blame, but this could not be the case. He had searched a number of Vovimian prisoners over the years, and even Vovimians with the thickest provincial accents could understand Weldon's accent, which was a bland, mid-class accent spoken throughout the Kingdom of Vovim. Layle, whose native accent was very thick indeed, had assured Weldon in the past that Weldon's Vovimian was clear and distinct.

Weldon sighed inwardly, taking care that his sigh should not be noticed by the prisoner. "Mr. Hallam, we have certain rules in the Eternal Dungeon. One is that prisoners must stand while in the presence of their Seeker."

Still the prisoner did not speak. He had moved, quite subtly, from a sitting position to a crouch. Weldon did not find this reassuring. Nor did he like the look on the prisoner's face: the eyes were squinting in a calculating fashion.

Weldon wondered, belatedly, whether he had addressed the prisoner in the wrong way. Vovimians could be touchy about such matters. He tried again. "Or perhaps you wish to be addressed as Mr. Zenas—"

The prisoner moved then, like a snake. Weldon had long years of experience in handling prisoners with calculating looks; he had been prepared for a movement, and a quick one at that. But he had assumed that the prisoner would rise to his feet before attacking, thus giving Weldon time to retreat and call for help. This prisoner did not. He slid forward on his knees, with such deftness that he might have been a wild beast who lived low to the ground. By the time Weldon realized what was happening, the prisoner had already reached out and grabbed him.

Weldon jerked back; then, belatedly, he jerked the rest of his body back as well. The prisoner froze. His gaze went past Weldon, and Weldon knew without looking that Mr. Crofford had seen what was happening and had alerted Mr. Boyd. Without turning his head toward his guards, Weldon waved his hand slightly behind his back. A moment later, the door clicked shut.

The prisoner's gaze moved back to Weldon. The surprise in his expression it was replaced once more by narrowed eyes. After a moment's careful

consideration, the prisoner slid back to where he had been and then slowly rose to his feet.

Seen standing, the boy looked younger than twelve. If it had not been for the hardness of his slender muscles – which Weldon now guessed must be due to training in the arts of bodily defense – Weldon might have guessed him to be ten or eleven. His face was older, though. Whatever mask of innocence he had worn in public had slipped, showing the face of someone who was worldlywise.

Weldon shook himself inwardly. He was making assumptions ahead of the facts, which was dangerous. Even innocent prisoners were known to attack Seekers, since the Eternal Dungeon had no reputation for mercy. This boy might simply be desperate for freedom, terrified that he would be unjustly tortured.

If so, the worst possible thing that Weldon could do was to fulfill the prisoner's expectations. He hesitated.

And felt his back prickle. Mr. Crofford had witnessed three breakings of the Code so far: the prisoner had not obeyed his Seeker's order to stand, the prisoner had attacked his Seeker, and Weldon's body had come in contact with a prisoner's. The last was the most heinous crime, and the fact that the prisoner had initiated the touch could not save Weldon from the consequences of being reported to the Codifier if he failed to make clear to the prisoner that the touch was a punishable offense. Weldon's background would not permit such leniency.

"Mr. Zenas," he said and saw the prisoner's eyes flicker. Grateful to receive that much acknowledgment of his words, Weldon continued, "I should explain that you have certain rights and duties in this dungeon . . ."

He proceeded then with the standard speech about the Code, designed so that even the most ill-educated prisoner would understand that he had the right to report any abuse committed against him. Not that prisoners usually exercised that right. That was why the junior guards were there – to prevent the Seekers and the guards who had worked long with the Seekers from breaking the Code with prisoners. Weldon could almost hear the sound of Mr. Crofford drumming his fingers against the door, waiting to see whether Weldon would comply with the Code.

There was no help for it. And yet, as Weldon signalled with his hand toward the door at the end of his speech, he wondered whether he was doing this for the prisoner's sake or for his own.

The prisoner was now biting his lower lip, but he paid no attention to the two guards opening the door, even though one of them – Mr. Crofford – had taken his whip from his belt and was unwinding it.

"Mr. Zenas," Weldon said with proper solemnity, "kindly remove your shirt." Then he turned away. Ostensibly this was in order to direct his attention to the guards. In fact, it was in order to collect himself.

This was not the first time he had ordered the beating of a youth. On the rare occasions that underage prisoners were delivered to the Eternal Dungeon, they were almost invariably given into Weldon's care. Those prisoners usually emerged from their confinement unscathed. Weldon had a reputation among the other Seekers for having a special ability to avoid the types of confrontations that resulted in a prisoner being punished for breaking the Code.

On the few occasions when Weldon had been forced to take measures against young prisoners, he had been helped by the memories of his own schooldays beatings. He was giving to the youths nothing other than what his schoolmasters had given to him, and for a similar reason: in order to maintain the order necessary to educate the youths.

There was no reason, then, why sweat should have broken out on Weldon's skin at this moment. He glanced worriedly at Mr. Crofford to see whether the junior guard had noticed his hesitation, but Mr. Crofford was not watching him. He was staring at the prisoner, openmouthed.

The prisoner, having refused all previous orders, had chosen this moment to exceed orders. He was standing naked, his clothes neatly folded at his feet. His eye was on Weldon.

Weldon felt his heart jerk. He turned his head away, which was the most foolish thing he could have done; suddenly Mr. Crofford's gaze was upon him again, his eyes narrowed. Weldon swore inwardly.

"Mr. Chapman." His senior guard's voice was soft, but Weldon immediately looked over to where Mr. Boyd stood, at the far end of the cell. Weldon found that the prisoner had already turned and placed himself against that wall, reaching his hands up toward an inconspicuous iron ring on the frost-colored wall. The firepit beyond the glass wall danced with light, outlining the prisoner's body, and it was a moment before Weldon's eyes were able to adjust to see what Mr. Boyd had sighted. Then he walked forward slowly, his heart thrumming in his throat.

His first thought was that the boy's father had done this to him. That notion, he knew, was the result of evenings spent talking with Elsdon Taylor about Elsdon's childhood. But as Weldon drew closer, the absurdity of that idea became obvious. No father, not even a Vovimian father, would use a leaded whip on his son. Nor would any schoolmaster, not if he wanted to keep his position. In Yclau, only one authority was permitted use of the leaded whip. Weldon swore again, this time in a whisper.

He ran his eyes over the prisoner's back, trying to tell himself that he was misreading what he saw. The lines ran from the shoulder-blades down to the thighs, crisscrossing one another; the holes gouged in by the lead were clear. He tried to read from them how recent they were, but he had insufficient training in this. He had never before met a life prisoner, for the simple reason that such prisoners remained in their cells for life.

Unless, of course, they were Seekers. Weldon felt an odd moment of kinship with the prisoner – a realization of a bond he had not known he shared with the boy. That feeling quickly vanished as he realized the seriousness of the decision he faced.

He tried to concentrate his thoughts. How had a twelve-year-old boy ended up in a life prison, and how had he managed to leave it? Through his father's influence? It would fit with what Weldon had been told about the ambassador. A man exceedingly fond of his son, who had taken that son on a foreign trip for mysterious reasons. Perhaps Mr. Hallam had managed to bribe the prison guards to release his son, and then Mr. Hallam had quickly departed the country in an effort to ensure his son's future freedom.

You will understand why I am bringing Zenas when you meet him, he had told his eldest son. Perhaps the ambassador meant that he would explain

about Zenas's recent imprisonment when he had a chance to speak privately with his son Grove, outside of the limited confines of diplomatic posts. Or perhaps Mr. Hallam thought that the signs of whatever had caused the boy to go to prison would be clear.

The prisoner was watching him; his eyes were slits. It was futile, but Weldon tried anyway. "Mr. Zenas, how did you come to be beaten?"

The prisoner said nothing; nor did he remove his gaze. Against the brightness of the fire-wall, the pupils of his eyes had turned enormous, like that of a cat hunting at night.

Weldon knew without looking that Mr. Crofford was watching him, weighing his every word. He felt as though a noose were tightening around his neck. He nodded briefly to Mr. Boyd, who reached forward and tied the prisoner's hands to the ring with a strip of leather he carried for such purposes. The ring was not designed for youths of Zenas's height; the prisoner ended up on his toes, straining to reach it. Weldon thought of delaying proceedings until a longer bond could be found. Then he thought that he ought to consult with the High Seeker to see whether he had gone astray in his deductions about Vovimian imprisonment. He felt Mr. Crofford's gaze prick him, like a warning.

He cleared his throat and stepped back. "Mr. Zenas, the rules of this dungeon require that prisoners be beaten in accordance with their offence and with their past experience in receiving punishment. Therefore you will receive . . . twenty medium lashes."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Crofford give him a look that was like a blade-slice along the skin. Weldon knew that his punishment was far too low. Anyone who had committed an offense in the past that merited punishment by the leaded whip should receive twenty hard lashes at the very least. But he could not bring himself to make the punishment that hard.

He knew why, of course. Bloody blades, why had that fool of a High Seeker assigned him this prisoner now, of all times?

He did not even bother to ask the prisoner to count off his own punishment, as was usual. He nodded again to Mr. Boyd, and the senior

guard, in a colorless voice, began counting each stroke in the moment before Mr. Crofford delivered it.

This was Mr. Crofford's first occasion using his whip on anyone but Mr. Boyd; as Mr. Crofford's trainer, Mr. Boyd had received the dubious privilege of serving as the guard-in-training's lash-post. Weldon could not spare any attention for the junior guard, though. He would have to depend on his competent senior guard to halt proceedings if Mr. Crofford's technique proved less than adequate. Weldon's attention was where it always was, on the prisoner's face, and within a single lash he knew that something was wrong.

He had given beatings this hard to prisoners before, and even to young prisoners. As one example, there had been that boy transferred from Alleyway Prison, who had slit the throats of three old women simply in order to lift their purses. The boy had physically attacked, in successive order, his junior night guard, his senior night guard, and Weldon. And he had not flinched under the whip; he had merely bared his teeth like a wild animal.

This prisoner did not flinch either. He did not try to move his body out of the path of the lash or turn his gaze from his torturer. But within a moment of the crack of the first lash, the first tear had fallen, followed closely afterwards by others. The prisoner's worldweary expression did not change.

Weldon waited until the fourth lash. When he began to hear sobs emerge from the prisoner's throat, he knew that something was seriously wrong. No prisoner so hardened as to receive the leaded whip should be reacting this way to a small number of medium lashes. It could simply be play-acting, of course, an attempt to raise sympathy. But the prisoner was making no effort to screw up his face as a sign of pain; he was simply biting his lip, his chin trembling as he sought to hold back the sobs.

The pain within Weldon grew too great to bear. He held up his hand. The fifth lash landed anyway, earning Mr. Crofford a sharp rebuke from Mr. Boyd. At Weldon's gesture, the senior guard came forward quickly to free the prisoner.

The prisoner, released from his straining bond, collapsed to his knees with a thud upon the stone floor that made Mr. Crofford wince. Leaning his forearm against the warm wall, the boy proceeded to smother a series of sobs against it.

Weldon's uneasiness grew. He knew that he should keep his distance – one of the most common methods of attack by prisoners was to pretend to be crying in order to lure their Seekers near them. But Weldon found himself stepping forward to see the prisoner's face.

He was standing within arm's reach of the boy when the prisoner stopped sobbing suddenly and looked up. Weldon felt his muscles tense. Even so, once again he was not prepared for the boy's quickness. This time the boy managed to get one of Weldon's trouser knots undone before Weldon stumbled back.

"Bloody blades!" The Yclau words burst from him. Then, switching back to Vovimian, he shouted, "What in Hell's name are you doing?"

Without warning, the boy turned and flung himself prone upon the floor. His sobs had returned, and now they had a hysterical note to them. Mr. Crofford's gaze had finally shifted away from Weldon; he was staring at the prisoner. Mr. Boyd frowned, as though he too were trying to penetrate the mystery of what was occurring.

Weldon's heart had settled into a hard, sickly thump. He decided it was time he started paying attention to that heart. He crouched down next to the prisoner, ignoring Mr. Crofford's disapproving look. Once again, the prisoner sensed his presence and went still. The boy twisted his body and ended up leaning on one elbow, staring up at Weldon. His free hand started to reach out toward Weldon's groin, and then stopped, hovering in mid-air.

"Mr. Boyd," Weldon said without moving his gaze from the boy. "Please clap your hands."

Standing behind the prisoner, Mr. Boyd obeyed the order. Startled, the prisoner looked behind him. Then, apparently treating this as a signal, he scrambled to his feet.

Weldon rose to join him. "All right," he said slowly in Yclau, "you're not a deaf-mute." He added in Vovimian, "Mr. Boyd, at my signal you will plunge your blade into the prisoner's back. . . . Now!"

As he spoke the word, he gave the subtle hand signal indicating a negation of his order, but it was unnecessary. The senior guard had not even bothered to unsheathe his blade. The prisoner, standing with his back to the guard, stared up at Weldon, waiting.

"Sweet blood," Weldon said slowly in a reverent voice. "You can't understand me. You haven't understood a word I've said since I walked into this cell. . . . What an *idiot* I am!"

He turned away abruptly and smashed his fist against the light-filled wall. Ignoring the sharp pain this brought, he said, "You've been trying to follow my orders since I arrived. You've tried to guess what I've wanted and have tried to do it. And I beat you – I *beat* you—"

"Sir!" Mr. Boyd's voice was abnormally sharp, halting Weldon in the midst of thumping the wall a second time. In a quieter voice, the senior guard said, "Sir, you're frightening the prisoner."

Weldon turned. The boy was where his Seeker had left him, standing further along the wall, staring up at him. But now the boy was hugging himself with his arms, and his body was shivering.

They stared at one another for a moment, the boy and his torturer, and then Zenas seemed to make up his mind. Quickly he swirled round and pressed his body against the wall. Standing on tiptoe, he reached up toward the ring and waited.

That was the moment when Weldon felt sickness enter him. He stepped forward, and in a voice as soft as he would have used toward a baby, he said, "No. That's all over now. No more."

He shook his head, hoping this gesture meant the same in southern Vovim as it did in the rest of Vovim. Evidently it did, for the boy slowly lowered his arms and settled back onto his heels. He remained facing the wall, though, his eyes narrowed again as he sought to decipher his next order.

Weldon swallowed heavily. "Mr. Boyd," he said, keeping his voice soft and his eyes on Zenas, "please help Mr. Zenas return to his clothes. Mr. Crofford, be so kind as to fetch the healer and have him care for the prisoner." He turned away.

"Where are you going, sir?" The junior guard's voice was quick, and under it was a note of accusation.

Weldon turned to look at him. After a long moment, Mr. Crofford flushed. Weldon received no satisfaction from that fact. He said carefully, "I am going to see the Codifier. Unless you would prefer to speak to him first?"

Mr. Crofford gave a little shake of his head; his face was now thoroughly red. Weldon looked briefly at the prisoner, who was watching all of this with uneasiness beginning to travel into his expression. Then Weldon beckoned to his senior guard.

Treating his Seeker's commands in their proper order, Mr. Boyd handed Zenas his clothes and waited until the boy had dressed himself before making his way over to the Seeker. Speaking in a low voice, as though he might be understood by the prisoner, Weldon said, "I want a watch placed on him."

Mr. Boyd had worked in the dungeon too long to have to ask why. He nodded and asked, "Shall I fetch you if anything happens?"

"Please. And see that the night guards have the same orders."

He turned away and waited for Mr. Boyd to unlock the door. Then he stood for a moment, staring at the dim corridor. Sweat covered him once more, and this time he could not pretend that it was without cause. Taking a deep breath, he walked through the doorway and made his way down to the dragon's den.

o—o—o

"It's my fault," said Weldon, raising his voice to be heard over the clatter of metal nearby. "I've been a Seeker for fourteen years – I should know the difference between a prisoner who is calculating how to attack and a prisoner who is calculating how to survive."

He said nothing about Mr. Crofford's part in the matter. If a Seeker was such a fool as to let his twenty-year-old junior guard unnerve him into acting against his instincts, he deserved any punishment he received.

Layle slipped the straw of his cup under his hood and sipped a moment before replying, "The fault is mine. I knew quite well that some of the more backwards inhabitants of southern Vovim have never learned the Common Speech. If I had been thinking . . ."

He fell silent. Nearby, a jagged-toothed wheel fell with a thud onto a man's boot, eliciting an outraged yell. The other man laughed, and then belatedly made a solicitous enquiry as to the first man's health.

Weldon began to open his mouth to respond to the High Seeker. Then he changed his mind and relaxed back against the wall behind the bench, stretching out his legs. He was grateful to be off his feet. It was nearly midnight, and he had spent most of the day standing in the Codifier's office as his past was paraded before him.

It had not been a full-scale investigation, the type demanded when a Seeker was suspected of deliberately breaking the Code. But it had been bad enough. Weldon's records had been brought out, both the public ones kept by the Record-keeper and the private ones in the Codifier's possession. The records had been pored over, line by line, as the Codifier recollected all of Weldon's past transgressions, large and small. Then the Codifier had disappeared for several minutes to learn what he could from the prisoner's demeanor, and when he returned, grim-faced, he had summoned a stream of witnesses: Weldon's guards, the retired Seeker who had trained Weldon, and every Seeker and guard who had worked closely with Weldon for the past three years. All had been questioned carefully to determine whether Weldon's infraction was part of an ongoing pattern. Even the Queen's guards who had delivered the prisoner to the Eternal Dungeon had been summoned from the palace to give witness to what conversation had taken place between the High Seeker and the Record-keeper at the time that the prisoner was assigned to Weldon.

Weldon was not at all surprised. Only the most careless Seeker would have done what he did, for all Seekers were trained to be on the alert for any sign that their prisoner did not understand what was being said to him.

Although the Eternal Dungeon had never before undergone the trauma of having a prisoner searched by a Seeker who did not know the prisoner's language, commoner prisoners often had difficulty understanding the more refined speech of their Seekers. Weldon, who had first entered this dungeon as a commoner prisoner, was the last man who should have ignored clear signals that a prisoner did not understand the orders he was being given.

From the direction of the Codifier's questions as the day lengthened, Weldon gathered that the Codifier placed the primary blame upon the High Seeker, for not giving over the prisoner to the Seeker most qualified to search him, namely the High Seeker himself. Weldon wished that his conscience could shift the blame that easily.

Layle was still watching the men working a few yards away. The High Seeker had not yet been summoned to see the Codifier, since he had spent the day having his injuries tenderly cared for by Elsdon Taylor. The moment Elsdon had returned to work, however, Layle had slipped out of bed. Weldon had discovered him half-fainting near the inner dungeon entrance that was closest to the rack rooms, and had helped the High Seeker to his destination, namely to supervise the repair of the malfunctioning rack.

Layle took another sip of the tea that Weldon had fetched him. Then he said, "Whoever is to blame, the question of Mr. Zenas's future remains. You say that the Codifier has not suspended you from searching the prisoner?"

Weldon shook his head. "He seemed to feel that, at this point, the prisoner was more likely to be frightened by the introduction of a new Seeker than by my continued presence. At least Mr. Zenas has seen me stop a beating. Do you agree with the Codifier's assessment, sir?" Like Layle, Weldon took care to speak formally in the presence of the blacksmith and his brother, and like Layle, Weldon had his hood covering his face. From this angle, Weldon could not see Layle's eyes, which were often impenetrable in any case.

Layle nodded; his head remained turned toward the rack. "If Mr. Zenas has heard anything about Vovimian prisons, then transferring him to another

Seeker will only increase his fear that he is to be passed from torturer to torturer. I'll give Mr. Daniels my recommendation that you remain at your post. You will need a translator, though. I'll send a request to the Queen's Secretary for a good translator – not one of the palace translators, but a native Vovimian who knows the old tongue. In a city this size, it shouldn't be hard to find one."

"Mr. Smith, why the bloody blades would an ambassador deny his son knowledge of the language spoken by the great majority of Vovimians?"

Layle was slow to respond. He had leaned forward to watch the painstaking process of reassembling the rack. "The ambassador may have had his reasons," he said finally.

Weldon waited. After a minute, Layle added, "I have two pieces of advice for you, Mr. Chapman. One is that you consult tomorrow with Mr. Taylor about your prisoner. The second is that I think you should take great care henceforth as to what orders you give Mr. Zenas. I believe it's likely that your prisoner will obey any order you give him, even if he believes that the order will cause him harm."

Weldon continued to wait, but no further advice was forthcoming. Finally Weldon said, "Sir, you know some of the old tongue. And you evidently have surmised more about this prisoner than I have. Wouldn't it be better if you—?"

"No." The High Seeker's voice was flat. "Under the circumstances, I believe I would be the worst possible person to search the prisoner."

Weldon drew in a breath, and then let it out again as the blacksmith approached. The man held up a small ball with spikes jutting out of it, like an iron chestnut. "Sorry to disturb you, sir. But neither my brother nor I can make anything of this. We found it in the workings within the bed."

Layle took the ball delicately between thumb and forefinger, held it up toward the oil lamp bracketed to the wall, and said, "Someone in the manufactory placed this in the rack by mistake. This is used only in Vovimian racks, in order to— Well, never mind. You can safely leave it out."

The blacksmith murmured his thanks and retreated to where his brother was struggling to return the wheel dial to its proper position. Layle, rolling the sharp-needled ball in his palm, said, "You had something to add, Mr. Chapman?"

Weldon opened his mouth, and then shut it again. His eye was on the ball, which Layle was playing with as though it were the toy of a child. A familiar toy.

A boy that age would be lucky if his torturers merely racked and executed him. Sweet blood, he had failed to understand what the High Seeker was telling him. This seemed to be Weldon's day for ignoring clear signals.

He told himself that Layle had been only fifteen when he became one of the King's Torturers. He told himself that, by Vovimian standards, Layle had still been a boy when he left Vovim's dungeon. It made no difference. Weldon still felt sick as he thought of what Layle might have done – of what he had undoubtedly done to at least one young prisoner placed in his hands.

Little wonder that Layle wanted to stay as far away from this prisoner as possible. The High Seeker had abused prisoners of all ages during his time in Vovim, and Weldon had good reason to know that Layle's greatest temptations to abuse lay with women, not boys. But a prisoner like this – young, vulnerable – must be a special temptation.

Weldon thought to himself that he ought to say, "You did not abuse Elsdon when he was your young, vulnerable prisoner." Like Elsdon, Weldon had complete faith in Layle's ability to control himself in the presence of prisoners. But Weldon did not have the High Seeker's dark past. Who was he to tell Layle that the High Seeker should return to work before he felt ready? All that Weldon could do was remain patient and hope that Layle would soon recognize that neither Mr. Zenas nor any other prisoner need fear unnecessary harm at the hands of the High Seeker.

Weldon could only hope that the Codifier would be equally patient.

CHAPTER THREE

He slept in his uniform that night, but even so, it took three shakes for his senior night guard to wake him.

Once awake, Weldon shot up to a sitting position. "The prisoner has tried to kill himself?"

"No, sir, but he is having trouble sleeping." His senior night guard had brought a lit candle into Weldon's bedroom, but his eyes were quite properly turned away as Weldon fumbled around his night-stand for his hood. "He keeps having dreams that cause him to wake up screaming, and then he'll sob for a while and finally fall asleep and reawaken a short time later, screaming again. It has happened three times now. I thought you would want to know."

"I do. Thank you." His hood now hiding his face, he swung his legs out of bed and began to grope the dark floor for his boots. "I would appreciate it if you would fetch Mr. Bergsen—"

But his senior night guard was holding under his nose a piece of stiff card, folded and bound. "This arrived from the Codifier's office a short while ago, sir. I was to give it to you when you came on duty."

Weldon took the card, borrowed his guard's dagger momentarily to break the string, and unfolded the message under the candlelight.

After a moment, he said, "Thank you. You may fetch the healer now."

He waited until his guard was gone before he let out his breath in relief. He recognized the hand of the High Seeker in this matter, but this message was needed proof that Mr. Daniels continued to consider him a trustworthy member of the inner dungeon.

When Weldon arrived at the door to Zenas's cell a few minutes later, he was not particularly surprised to find Mr. Crofford there, uniformed and holding quiet conversation with Weldon's junior night guard, who remained at the watch-hole. Weldon could easily remember his own early days as a guard-in-training, and how every drama in the dungeon seemed too exciting to miss.

"You understand what this is?" He handed the note to Mr. Crofford, who read aloud the contents to the other guard.

"Yes, sir." It was his junior night guard who replied. "It's a note from the Codifier, granting you exemption from the Code's rule against Seekers touching prisoners, should you consider it in this prisoner's best interests."

"Make sure the other guards see this." He waited until Mr. Crofford had nodded agreement, and then gave the order for the door to be opened. He was startled to realize that he was as tense as he had been during his earliest days in the inner dungeon.

The junior night guard was not as practiced as Mr. Boyd in opening a door quietly. By the time Weldon slipped inside the cell and heard the door close behind him, Zenas had raised his tear-drenched face and was staring up at him. The boy had positioned himself, not at the warm end of the cell where the fire continued to dance as gaily as it had in the daytime, but at the near end, in the dimmest light. He made a movement as though to rise.

Weldon shook his head and motioned him to stay where he was. Zenas watched with wide eyes as Weldon came over and sat on the floor beside him. The boy did not resist as the Seeker placed his arm around him, but he kept his gaze fixed on Weldon. Weldon wondered suddenly what the boy saw, staring at the black-hooded figure. Weldon could well imagine; he had seen himself in the mirror when he was in uniform.

He hesitated. It was one of the oldest tenets of the Code, and though it had been broken numerous times over the decades, Weldon knew that the High Seeker had especially strong feelings about this portion of the Code. Weldon had heard Layle explain at length why it was in the prisoners' best interests for the Seekers to remain hooded.

But this was a twelve-year-old boy, who had not heard the High Seeker deliver his speech about the benefits of formality in a Seeker. Sighing, Weldon repositioned himself so that his back was to the cell door. He raised the face-cloth of his hood.

The boy looked startled, and then thoughtful. For a moment, he scrutinized Weldon's face. Then his hand slowly reached out toward Weldon's lap. It hovered in the air.

"Just relax," said Weldon in a soft voice, placing his arm round Zenas and pressing the boy's head gently onto his shoulder. He took the boy's hovering hand into his own and laid it upon Zenas's lap. "Just try to relax."

Once again, the boy did not resist his actions; he lay limp within Weldon's arm, like a prisoner newly removed from the rack. Weldon could feel the stiff bandage under the back of the boy's shirt, where the healer had dressed his wounds.

Weldon took care to remain still. He badly wanted to kiss the boy, but even without the presence of the junior night guard at the watch-hole, that would be a bad idea.

He had gone over in his mind a dozen times the events of his earlier searching, and certain parts of it bothered him a great deal. If he had been functioning with even a small part of his usual acuity, those parts of the searching would have caused him to immediately halt the proceedings and leave to consult with the High Seeker. It was not as though this problem was new; it was especially common among female prisoners. It was one of the reasons why the Code forbade Seekers from touching prisoners. Even with the Codifier's implicit permission for him to hold Zenas like this, Weldon was uneasy, wondering whether he was making a grave matter yet worse.

The boy had begun to cry onto the Seeker's shirt. Weldon prayed that the cause was the boy's dreams rather than himself. He fished out his handkerchief and handed it to Zenas, who appeared not to know what do with it. Weldon carefully wiped the tears off Zenas's face, and then demonstrated to the boy how to use the cloth on one's nose. This fascinated the boy so much that no further tears were forthcoming. After a while, Zenas relaxed back against Weldon once more.

Weldon was feeling, as he so often did, the tremendous burden of a Seeker whose prisoner has demonstrated trust in him. Struggling to find words to evoke his thoughts, he said, "You look like my son."

Those were not the words he had intended to say. Zenas lifted his head from where it lay in the crook of Weldon's arm; he seemed more curious than alarmed at the sound of Weldon's voice. Weldon forced himself to smile at the boy.

"Well, not entirely like him," he clarified. "You're a bit older. He was only born a month ago. . . . He died."

He felt his throat close in upon the words. Zenas continued to stare at him, his brow folded in concentration at the words.

Weldon heard himself say, "It happened only a few days after he was born. He struggled for life from the beginning. Afterwards, our healer here sought out my parents' medical records. He discovered that it was my fault the boy died. There is a disease, transferred down from father to son . . . All of my brothers died in infancy; I nearly did as well. When the healer saw that my father's and grandfather's brothers had died as babies, he knew I must have inherited the disease. He has advised me not to beget any more children."

Zenas continued to look up at him, as though he were following every word of this tale. His hand still lay enfolded within Weldon's. Weldon cleared his throat and said, "My wife . . . She is a Seeker as well, but she's in training. She hasn't yet taken her oath of eternal confinement. She was estranged from her family when she first came here, but when her parents learned of their grandchild's death, they begged her to come home so that she could bury the child's ashes in the family crematorium. It seemed a good opportunity to make her peace with her family, so she obtained leave from the Codifier to go. . . . I'm not sure whether she's coming back."

The words he had never spoken before, even to himself, seemed to ring throughout the cell. Zenas's hand slipped from his. The boy raised his hand until it hovered a few inches from Weldon's face. It was then that Weldon became aware that he was crying.

Embarrassed at this unprofessional conduct, he hastily wiped his face dry on the sleeve of his uniform. Zenas's hand dropped, and the boy looked at Weldon uncertainly.

The cell door opened and slammed shut again.

Weldon only had time enough to pull his hood hastily down; then he looked to the side in order to see who the intruder was. Mr. Bergsen stood near the door, bag in hand, staring down at the two of them. "Well, well," he said softly. "What do we have here?"

Suddenly it was fourteen years before, and Weldon's junior day guard had walked into the cell to discover his Seeker holding a prisoner who had begun to cry. Weldon felt the old panic pummel him once more. "I have the Codifier's permission to touch this prisoner," he said quickly.

"Tush, man, do you think I care about those Seekerly rules of yours?" The healer knelt down and began rummaging through his bag. "I want to know your prisoner's health, not those fiddling regulations you Seekers worry about. I understand the boy is having trouble sleeping?"

He was still keeping his voice soft, Weldon noticed. The quietness was effective. Though Zenas had gone rigid upon the healer's entrance, now he was relaxed again within Weldon's arm, staring at the Seeker in apparent hopes that Weldon would find a way to convey the meaning of this visit.

Thus it was that Zenas missed the moment when Mr. Bergsen raised something briefly out of his bag, gave a grunt of satisfaction, and then returned it to the bag and began rummaging again.

Weldon stared at the healer in horror. "By all that is sacred, Mr. Bergsen, what is that? An instrument of torture?"

The healer chuckled, unoffended. "It looks like one, doesn't it? No, it's a new invention – it comes out of Vovim, actually. Your prisoner will most likely have seen it before. It's an underskin needle, used to insert drugs deep into the body so that they will work quickly. It works much faster than a sleeping drug taken by the mouth. Now, then, get the boy up onto his bench, please. He's likely to be fast asleep within a couple of minutes of the time I give him this."

Zenas was continuing to watch Weldon rather than the healer. Weldon pocketed his handkerchief, carefully helped the boy to his feet, and led him over to the sleeping bench. Weldon had always intensely disliked the cell benches. He had been told by prisoners who knew such things that the benches were far more comfortable to sleep upon than the floors provided at most of the lesser prisons, but Weldon looked with distaste at the stone slab with only the thinnest of mattresses.

Zenas scrambled onto the bench as though it were a comfortable armchair. He flicked a glance at the healer who was walking toward them, and then

suddenly he was clutching at Weldon's arm, babbling in a high-pitched voice.

Weldon, caught off-balance, stumbled and ended up sitting next to Zenas on the bench. The boy was dragging at his shirt now, as though Weldon were a log that kept him afloat in drowning waters. His voice had gone even higher; his words tumbled over one another. Weldon knew that the old tongue must have some relation to Vovim's Common Speech, but he could not recognize a single word of what the boy said. He suspected that even a native speaker of the old tongue would have been able to make little sense of the hysterical babble.

"Odd." Pausing to test the needle's output of liquid, the healer raised his voice to be heard over Zenas. "I'd have thought the boy would have seen a needle before. Hold him still, please. I don't have much practice with this."

Warning alarms were going off in Weldon's mind, but he had no time in which to decipher their meaning. Zenas was now clutching at his collar, in a manner likely to strangle him. Weldon firmly broke the boy's grasp; during his years in the lighted world, he had learned certain maneuvers that occasionally came in handy with dangerous prisoners. "It's all right," he said in a voice that was gentler than his grip. "It's all right. This will help you to sleep."

The boy went suddenly still. Encouraged, Weldon said softly, "It's all right. There's nothing to fear." He reached out and brushed the boy's hair lightly.

Mr. Bergsen leaned over the bench. "This will take but a second," he said cheerfully. He turned over Zenas's arm, now gone limp. Zenas made a small sound and looked again at Weldon. Weldon smiled at him and put his arm round the boy's back. He could feel the boy shaking.

"Done," said the healer triumphantly. Looking down, Weldon saw a small spot of blood near the crook of the arm, where the needle had gone in. Zenas stared down at the blood. He raised his arm and held it out for Weldon's inspection, as though with pride.

Then his expression crumpled. Weldon pulled Zenas's head to his shoulder as the boy began to sob convulsively.

"Children," said the healer with a sigh. "Always fearing the worst, and then recovering from their tears without a sign of what came before. I wish I still had that ability. Stay with him, please, till he has fallen asleep – it won't be long. I've given him only a small dose, as I gather from what your guard said that you intend to search the boy tomorrow." His voice turned dry.

"Thank you, Mr. Bergsen," Weldon replied as he pulled Zenas back from his shoulder and coaxed him to lie down on the bench.

"Not at all. I wish I could help you further with this case, but without any of the boy's medical records, there's not much I can say. Except that somebody has been treating him very ill – but you'll have noticed that when you beat him."

The healer's voice had turned from dry to dark. Weldon met his gaze steadily; he knew he deserved the rebuke. After a minute during which the healer's lips pressed hard against one another, Mr. Bergsen gave an abrupt nod of farewell and left the cell, whistling a popular ditty about the Eternal Dungeon's heartless torturers.

Zenas was still sobbing, but his crying had become more breathy and subdued. Weldon, who was now kneeling beside the bench, put his hand in Zenas's and murmured incoherent assurances, as he had to his son during the five days that the baby had screamed from the pain of its life. He felt Zenas tug at his hand, and he let the boy draw his hand closer. Zenas's lips had no sooner touched the back of his hand than the boy's eyes closed, and the cell became silent.

In an automatic manner prompted by too many years of finding motionless prisoners in their cells, Weldon checked to make sure that the boy was still breathing. Then he brought out his handkerchief again and did his best to clean the boy's face. When he was finished, he sat a while, contemplating what lay before him. It was a sight, he thought, that he ought to have recognized before.

He knew well enough that the main reason he was assigned underage prisoners was that he was the only man in the inner dungeon whom the High Seeker could be absolutely sure was not attracted to children. It had been a century since this dungeon adopted the *Code of Seeking* and put an

end to the old abuses, but certain aspects of the dungeon's old reputation continued to linger in the public mind. The High Seeker could not afford the possibility of another child-rape.

Weldon was not erotically attracted to children – nor to adults, for that matter – but he knew beauty when he saw it. His eye travelled slowly over the sleeping boy, gathering in what lay there: the slender, delicate figure; the smooth skin the color of sweet maple syrup; the tight black curls framing the face; the full, violet-brown lips; the dusky lids, with their long lashes, hiding the enormous eyes. It had all been there before him, from the first moment, and if he had allowed himself to look at the boy with the scrutiny that a Seeker should give to his prisoner, he would have known that this was a boy whose appearance could raise men's desires.

But he had not looked properly at Zenas. He could not blame Mr. Crofford for that fact. Weldon knew that he had failed to give Zenas his full attention because he had feared that he would develop affection for the boy and end up feeling once more the pain of his son's death.

And now the anticipation of death had returned, despite all his best efforts. "I have been a fool," he murmured to Zenas, "but if I can, I will find a way to save you."

He leaned forward and kissed the sleeping boy on his cheek. He knew that his junior night guard must be watching, and that the guard would report his act to Mr. Daniels. He found that he did not care.

o—o—o

The Vovimian translator was unimpressed by Weldon. That was what Weldon noticed most. He had become used to immediate awe or fear from any new person he met, including the Eternal Dungeon's guards. Mr. Draper, however, had spent a year in the Vovimian army, serving as a translator for Yclau prisoners who were questioned.

"You have no idea," said Mr. Draper, "how difficult it is to translate the words of men who are having their toes cut off."

"Indeed?" Weldon attempted to sound professionally detached as he glanced over at the small man beside him, who wore wire-rimmed glasses

and looked very much like what he was, namely an employee of one of the city's international banks.

"Yes, they had usually screamed their throats raw by the time they gave their information. My job was particularly difficult if boiling oil had been poured into their mouths. Thank the gods that the Yclau usually know how to write."

Weldon tried to think of a reply to this and failed. They were walking down the somber corridor leading to Zenas's cell, accompanied on all sides by glares from the guards who overheard the translator's words. In theory, Vovim and Yclau were in everlasting peace with one another. In reality, only three years had passed since the latest truce had begun, and even the youngest guard here would have seen mutilated ex-soldiers on the streets, begging their living as a result of their time of imprisonment with the Vovimians.

Weldon did his best to steer the conversation in another direction. "So you are familiar with the old tongue."

"Oh, certainly," replied Mr. Draper, who appeared to be taking no notice of the hostile looks around him. "I spent my youth in southern Vovim, attending school there. My parents thought I should learn what Vovim was like at its purest, at its stainless foundation, untainted by foreign influences—"

"And you learned the old tongue there?" Weldon discreetly put up a finger in warning to a guard they were passing, who was stroking his dagger hilt as he listened to the Vovimian.

"It would have been as much as my life was worth not to. The southern Vovimians, you understand, are greatly insulted if you do not make at least an effort to learn their language." He winced, as though at some memory, then added, "It is next to impossible for an Yclau to learn the old tongue, but it is not so hard for a Vovimian. Your High Seeker, for example—"

"Here we are," said Weldon, though in fact they were several yards short of their destination: the door where his day guards stood.

"How is the prisoner?" Weldon asked when they had reached the door. He spoke in Vovimian out of courtesy to their guest, though Mr. Draper had been speaking fluently in Yclau.

"He woke an hour ago, sir, when Mr. Crofford brought him his lunch," Mr. Boyd replied in the same tongue. "He seemed surprised to see Mr. Crofford. After Mr. Crofford left, he explored the entire cell, as though he was not sure he was in the same place." Mr. Boyd glanced at Mr. Crofford for confirmation of this wording, but the junior guard did not notice him; his eye was firmly fixed upon the watch-hole. Mr. Boyd concluded, "He sat down in the corner finally and has remained quietly there ever since."

"No tears?" asked Weldon.

"No, sir. He appears simply to be waiting. Do you wish me to accompany you into the cell today?" His gaze slid briefly over the Vovimian.

"Yes," replied Weldon. "The prisoner may give us a confession today."

Mr. Boyd was already pulling from the inside of his jacket the pencil and memorandum book that was kept there for such an occasion. Weldon gave his attention over to the younger guard. He could see Mr. Crofford's hand resting upon the door latch, and it was shaking. The guard had risen before dawn the previous day, Weldon remembered, and had been up late giving his witness to the Codifier, and then had risen early this morning.

"Mr. Crofford."

"Sir?" The junior guard did not move from his post.

"I was very much impressed by the witness you gave to the Codifier yesterday. It showed the proper objectivity of a dungeon guard, making no attempt to bend the evidence in one direction or the other."

Mr. Crofford's neck had turned pink. "Thank you, sir."

Weldon put his hand briefly on the junior guard's shoulder. "You may take a break for the next three hours, Mr. Crofford. Mr. Boyd will be inside the cell to help if any problems occur, and Mr. Draper will be a witness to our behavior."

"Yes, sir." The guard's reply was so prompt that Weldon guessed the young man was ready to drop from exhaustion. Weldon waited until Mr. Crofford was headed toward the exit that would take him back to his living quarters in the outer dungeon; then Weldon nodded to Mr. Boyd.

Mr. Boyd's opening of the door was as quiet as usual, but somehow Zenas heard him anyway. By the time Weldon stepped through the door, Zenas was on his feet, running. Mr. Boyd quickly closed the door behind them, but Zenas made no attempt to go near it. He skidded to a halt in front of Weldon and said something quickly in the old tongue, his face eager.

"Mr. Draper?" Weldon turned his head toward the translator as Mr. Boyd locked the door.

The translator shrugged. "A simple greeting, with the proper degree of deference."

Weldon nodded, glanced over to make sure that Mr. Boyd was ready with pencil and paper, and told Mr. Draper, "Please introduce yourself to Mr. Zenas and explain that you will serve as translator for this conversation."

Mr. Draper did so, in words that Weldon would have sworn could not be spoken by any human tongue. Mr. Boyd, carefully writing the prisoner's name at the top of a page, winced, as he might have done had a playful young guard drawn his fingernails across the Record-keeper's slateboard.

The boy's face grew yet more eager; there was almost the suggestion of a smile on his face now. He jabbered something back quickly, and then waited, his eye on Weldon. He had taken no notice of Mr. Boyd, standing nearby with his pencil poised.

"Your prisoner once again greets you, this time with a yet greater degree of deference," Mr. Draper reported. "He says that it gives him great joy to finally have the opportunity to speak with his new master."

Mr. Boyd's pencil-point, scribbling all this down, suddenly broke. With a muttered apology, the guard fished in his pocket for a replacement. Weldon stared from Mr. Draper to the young prisoner watching him with anticipation.

"Does he believe I'm his workmaster?" Weldon asked slowly. "Or his schoolmaster?"

The translator snorted with amusement at these suggestions.

"But . . ." Weldon stared again at Zenas, confusion clawing at him. "But Mr. Hallam's eldest son, Mr. Grove, said that this boy was his father's adopted son, his – his *chau*."

Zenas had begun to turn his eyes toward Mr. Draper, awaiting the translation, but his gaze suddenly snapped back to Weldon, as though something of great importance had been said. The hint of a smile disappeared from his face.

Mr. Draper snorted again. "Who did the translation for you, one of the palace translators? . . . I thought so. The Yclau will never understand the subtleties of Vovimian languages." He spoke without hostility, as though reciting a simple fact. "*Chau* is the old tongue's word for 'beloved'; whatever other meanings it acquires are determined by the context. In this particular context, Mr. Grove could only have been saying that this boy was—"

"His father's bed-slave," Weldon concluded in a low voice. He turned his gaze back to Zenas, feeling as though he had just been gifted with spectacles that allowed him to see through the murky darkness surrounding his prisoner. All was clear now.

The High Seeker had known, of course. Having owned a sexual slave himself, he had recognized from Weldon's description what the boy was. No wonder he had been determined to stay as far away from Zenas as possible; this boy must evoke some of Layle's darkest memories of his time in Vovim's dungeon.

Except that it seemed such practices were not confined to the Hidden Dungeon.

Zenas, having heard Weldon speak the word denoting his duties to his former master, remained still, watching Weldon's face and awaiting his instructions. Weldon felt a sickness enter him as he remembered Layle's advice concerning this prisoner. He tried to settle his mind in order. He

had been wrong; Zenas had not been sexually molested by a man who served as his father. Weldon suspected, though, that the tale he was about to hear would prove just as foul as the one he had anticipated.

He was wrong again. The tale was worse.

o—o—o

Zenas's earliest memories were happy ones. As a very young child, his duties as a slave were light, and though he missed the mother he had never known, he enjoyed tagging at the heels of his father as his father attended to his duties. A strong affection grew between Zenas and his father, one that kept Zenas from worrying about the hard life he knew he would take on as he grew older.

At the age of seven, all that changed, because Zenas, in a moment of carelessness, decided to join some of the younger boys in bathing at one of the estate water-holes.

As he had done when he was younger, he pulled off all of his clothes in order to swim. Unhappily, at that moment his master chanced to walk by. Something about the way that Mr. Hallam looked at Zenas made the boy quickly reclothe himself and hurry to where his father was helping to uproot a tree that their master had decided was no longer of interest to him. Zenas had no sooner finished stammering out his tale when one of the house-slaves came up to them with the news that Mr. Hallam wished to speak with Zenas.

Zenas's father dropped his spade and stared hard at the house-slave who, for some reason, appeared embarrassed. Zenas started to move forward, but his father grabbed him. "Stay here," Zenas's father said. "I will speak to the master."

That was the last time Zenas saw his father. He believed his master when Mr. Hallam informed him gravely that he had not meant to strike Zenas's father so hard; Mr. Hallam had simply been furious that one of his slaves would defy his orders. It might well have been true. Mr. Hallam was known for his temper, but he was not ordinarily one to permanently injure his slaves, much less kill them.

Zenas, grieving for the sudden loss of his father, accepted Mr. Hallam's comfort and his promise of protection. Even when he learned what form that protection would take, he considered himself lucky. He knew that Mr. Hallam kept bed-slaves – what slave on the estate did not know this? He also knew that bed-slaves were given light duties during the daytime. Unlike his father, Zenas would not be condemned to spend his days doing back-breaking work in the fields.

Remembering the lesson of his father's death, Zenas always took great pains to try to please his master and to show that he properly appreciated his master's care of him. This grew more difficult when, in the year Zenas turned ten, Mr. Hallam grew bored with his old bedtime entertainments and decided to try something new.

It was an ordinary whip at first. Zenas, sobbing into his pillow after each encounter, told himself that he was still lucky. Mr. Hallam had a dozen bed-slaves and was often away on business. Sometimes Mr. Hallam even slept with his wife. The master rarely called for Zenas's services more than once or twice a month, giving Zenas full time to recover for his next trial. So matters continued for the next two years.

Five months before Zenas's arrival the Eternal Dungeon, Mr. Hallam announced that he would be serving as an ambassador in Yclau during the coming year. Zenas was delighted, and strangely enough his delight did not diminish when he learned that he was to accompany Mr. Hallam on this trip. As a slave, Zenas ordinarily would not have been permitted to leave the borders of the estate during his lifetime. He welcomed this opportunity to see more of Vovim and to visit a foreign country. It seemed worth a little pain.

What he had not realized was that Mr. Hallam would be taking only him. The master's wife and the other bed-slaves were left behind. The implications of this decision took some time to arrive.

The first part of the journey, made through Vovim, was by carriage over bad roads. This section of the journey was boring for Mr. Hallam and exhausting for both of them. On the few occasions that they slept in inns, Mr. Hallam made no attempt to touch Zenas. Once they reached the border, however, they switched to a train. Zenas, excited at being

permitted to travel in an iron cage that whizzed through the countryside, did not immediately notice that his master's boredom had reached a dangerous peak. His only warning came on the first night of their travel, when Mr. Hallam entered his cabin, holding a long box.

"I have something new for us," Mr. Hallam announced, and with a gleam in his eye he proceeded to unwrap the leaded whip.

Zenas could not have said what the Yclau countryside looked like. The trip should have taken no more than a week or two, but the Yclau, fiends of cleverness at inventing machinery, had not yet learned how to control the weather. Spring floods washed out several sections of the railroad track, and the trip extended to two months, then three. Zenas spent that time moaning in his bed, visited only by his master, who appeared to take no interest in any sight other than that of Zenas's body. Zenas began to wonder whether he would survive to reach the capital.

He wished the other slaves had come on this trip so that he could ask them what to do. But there was nobody he could consult; no one entered the cabin, and everyone who passed by the cabin spoke in Yclau. Zenas could not even figure out which of the passers-by were slaves.

Mr. Hallam must have begun to be concerned himself. Six weeks before they reached their destination, he put away the whip and turned his attention to nursing Zenas back to health, murmuring explanations similar to those he had given upon the death of Zenas's father. Zenas was too numb to do anything except accept his master's ministrations, and he could see that this displeased his master. Fearing the consequences of such displeasure, Zenas made a greater effort to return to his old self, smiling at his master and reaching out to take his hand.

By the time they arrived at the capital, Zenas was well enough to walk again. His master had made clear that he would have no time for Zenas once they reached the palace, and he had even given Zenas permission to explore his new surroundings, provided he did not leave the palace grounds. Zenas looked forward to that time, as a boy dying of thirst looks forward to water.

They were kept waiting for the first two weeks by various bureaucratic procedures that appeared designed to drive palace guests to impatience.

Seeing his master's lips thin after each trial, Zenas desperately strove to keep Mr. Hallam happy. Mr. Hallam called for his services each night, but he used neither the leaded whip nor any other implement on his slave. Zenas began to hope that matters had returned to normal.

They supped one night in the Queen's own dining hall. Zenas was awed at this opportunity to accompany his master into a place of great richness and refinement. He knew that only the most favored bed-slaves were allowed such gifts. At one point, an Yclau man came up and spoke briefly to Mr. Hallam in the language that estate visitors from the King's capital sometimes used. In his reply, Mr. Hallam said the word *chau* and smiled at Zenas. Zenas smiled back, pleased at having his service openly acknowledged.

He grew uneasy, though, as the dinner continued. Something was wrong. His master made no attempt to sit with other diners, as he had on previous nights, and he kept shooting dark looks at the Queen of Yclau. Fearing the worst, Zenas put all of his best efforts into pleasing his master, and he felt relief when his master finally turned to him with a smile. Mr. Hallam placed his hand over Zenas's.

"I have learned that the Queen will not be able to meet with me for another fortnight," he told his slave, stroking Zenas's hand. "No matter. It will give us time to be together." A familiar gleam entered his eye.

Zenas was not sure afterwards how it happened. It was as though his soul had been taken from his body and hovered above, watching his body move with independence. It watched as he picked up the knife; it watched as he plunged the knife into Mr. Hallam's throat; it watched as he stabbed over and over and over. It did not return to the body until the very end, when guards dragged Zenas up from the floor and began jabbering questions at him in the Yclau tongue. It was then that Zenas realized, with coldness spreading through his body, that he had committed the crime for which there could be no forgiveness.

o—o—o

"I understand that I have done the most terrible of deeds," the boy said in a choked voice. "I know that hell awaits my body and that I shall dwell in Hell's cell forever."

He did not move his eyes from Weldon as he spoke. He had been told by now that Weldon was not his new master but simply a man appointed by the Queen to learn why Zenas had killed Mr. Hallam. Nonetheless, Zenas kept his gaze fixed on the Seeker, as though awaiting orders.

Weldon's thoughts were on linguistics. He had finally recognized a word that was the same in both the old tongue and the Common Speech of Vovim: hell. He was remembering the moment in this cell when he had invoked that terrible word in a careless manner, though he had known that no Vovimian spoke the word hell except with great seriousness. It was the name of the Vovimian place of afterdeath, where criminals were punished. But when said with a certain accent, it was also the name of the Vovimian torture-god, never spoken except in the presence of the damned. It was hardly surprising that, upon hearing that name spoken, Zenas had gone into hysterics.

"I know I deserve a most terrible death," Zenas repeated in a low voice. "I was surprised this morning that you did not complete the death. I understand now, though, that you needed to learn first all that I had done."

Weldon snapped his gaze over to Mr. Draper, who was continuing to supply the translation. "'Complete the death'? What does he mean by that?"

An exchange followed between the two Vovimians. Finally, Mr. Draper raised his eyebrows and turned to Weldon. "Did you give this boy the needle last night?" he asked, his voice accusatory.

"Yes, certainly," Weldon replied. "Our healer injected him with a sleeping drug. I'm told that such a procedure is common in Vovim."

Mr. Draper raised his eyes toward the ceiling, as though praying to his gods for patience in dealing with the Yclau. "Mr. Chapman," he said carefully, as if educating a small child, "your healers may, in their whimsy, decide to put sleeping potions in their needles. But in Vovim, the needle is used for only one purpose: to execute slaves. It is used to inject *marblak*, a powerful poison that takes many hours to work and causes great agony in the victim during those hours."

Zenas continued to stand motionless during the discussion of his execution. Weldon thought to himself, with a sinking heart, that he would have to make another trip to the Codifier's office.

It was not as though he had received no warning. *I think you should take great care henceforth as to what orders you give Mr. Zenas.* Sweet blood, he might as well hand in his hood after today's searching. He had evidently lost whatever powers he had once possessed as a Seeker.

"Tell him—" Weldon stopped. Mr. Boyd had raised his eyes from the paper he was still scribbling upon; the motion alerted Weldon to the fact that his voice was quavering. He tried again. "Tell Mr. Zenas that the poison you speak of is never used in Yclau. Tell him that no one will try to kill him in such a manner or give him any other sort of prolonged death."

The boy's breath went out of his body at this news. He too raised his eyes to the ceiling. Then he murmured something, which Mr. Draper translated. "He says that he blames himself for not recognizing that a man of such powerful mercy as yourself would give him only a quick death. With shame filling him, he pleads your pardon for misjudging you."

Weldon opened his mouth, and then bit his tongue to keep himself from speaking. Very early in his career as a Seeker, he had learned the stupidity of raising false hopes in his prisoners by telling them that they would not be executed. He could not make such promises; he did not have final say over the prisoners' fates, and many a prisoner whom he believed should live he had watched dangle from the hangman's noose.

Zenas murmured something more. For the first time, his eyes were cast down. Mr. Draper reported, "He begs to be forgiven for being so bold as to make a request of you, knowing as he does that he deserves the worst treatment. But you have shown him great kindness so far: when he misunderstood your orders, you gave him only a short beating, and you comforted him when he dreamt of his death, and you even held his hand after giving him the needle. And so, with deep trepidation, he asks to know whether it is possible for you to stay with him when the time comes for his execution, and whether it is possible for you to hold his hand then, for he is very much afraid of dying."

Mr. Boyd had stopped writing, though he was taking care to keep his eyes fixed upon the paper, as though his attention was focussed purely on secretarial matters. Mr. Draper maintained no such fiction; he was staring openly at Weldon, awaiting his answer. Weldon scarcely saw either of them. His gaze was reserved for the youth before him, who was peeking up at him through shy lashes.

"Tell him," said Weldon, in a voice now gone firm, "that I will stay with him. Tell him that, no matter what happens, I will stay with him and I will hold him."

Even before Mr. Draper finished his translation, the boy had begun to move. He knelt down, his face now tilted up to look at Weldon, and he took Weldon's hand. He kissed the Seeker's hand but did not speak.

Weldon's heart was drumming so loud that he feared the boy could hear it. He gently drew the boy back onto his feet, and then said in as brisk a manner as he could manage, "Mr. Draper, now that the prisoner has given his statement, it is likely that his trial will be scheduled for tomorrow morning. Is it possible for you to be present in the appointed judging room at that time, in order to provide a translation?"

Mr. Draper had taken his pocket-watch out of his waistcoat and was peering down at it, as though it might provide him with the answer. "If the trial does not take too long," he replied. "The Queen is scheduled to give a speech on business law at noontime, and I am to provide the translation for the Vovimian delegates from my bank."

"Thank you," Weldon said. "Mr. Boyd, you are ready?" He looked over at his senior guard, who had been quickly flipping through his notes, checking what was written there. Mr. Boyd nodded, and Weldon added, "Then I will just ask you to stay a few more minutes today, Mr. Draper, in order to translate as my guard reads aloud the prisoner's statement, so that Mr. Zenas can confirm whether Mr. Boyd has correctly rendered his words."

When Weldon reached the door of the cell, he turned. Mr. Boyd was repeating the tale of the water-hole, and Mr. Draper was translating. Zenas was nodding his acknowledgment, but he did not look at either of the men. His gaze remained on Weldon.

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Layle's reply was mercifully brief. "Yes, of course. I'll need to speak with the Codifier about this, but I'm sure his answer will be the same as mine. Who is the magistrate assigned to this case?"

"Mr. Jones," said Weldon. He kept his voice low, so as not to disturb Elsdon Taylor, who was in the next room, sitting at his desk as he frowned over documentwork. "He's in semi-retirement, I've heard, so I've not worked with him before. Do you know him?"

Layle did not stir from where he sat in his bed, propped up by pillows and surrounded by books, food, and similar gifts from Elsdon. "Quite well," the High Seeker replied quietly. "He's the man who sentenced Elsdon to be hanged after Elsdon testified that his father had abused him."

Weldon took in a deep breath and held it. For a moment, he and Layle looked at one another. Then they both looked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr. Jones had the appearance of being a great deal more than half retired: his face was that of a prune, and his fingers were as fleshless as the pen he tapped upon his table. He had a sharp gaze, though, and seemed to delight in directing that gaze toward the prisoner, standing rigid next to his translator.

Weldon gave a worried look at Zenas, and then turned his attention to the only other man near the magistrate's table. This man was sitting; he was dressed neatly in a well-cut suit that was rich without being ostentatious. The man's hand was resting lightly upon the head of his walking stick, which did not have a skull at its top, despite the rumors of how the Vovimian elite were supposed to dress themselves. Eyeing the man, Weldon concluded that, if Mr. Grove was as much a monster as his father had been, he did as good a job as the ambassador at hiding the fact.

The magisterial recorder reached the end of reciting the witness that Zenas had provided to Weldon. Weldon did not look round to see how the numerous guards in this room were reacting to Zenas's chilling tale, even though Weldon knew that his own guards were among them. By tradition, the Eternal Dungeon's guards departed from the judging room the moment they had delivered their prisoner, in order to symbolically indicate that the prisoner's fate now lay in the hands of the Queen's officials. Both Mr. Crofford and Mr. Boyd, though, had seemed disposed to linger on this occasion, so Weldon had quickly motioned them into a corner where they would be inconspicuous. He knew that Zenas's tale, being a matter of public record, had spread quickly throughout the dungeon, and he wondered how many of the dungeon inhabitants were waiting anxiously to know the results of this trial.

The magistrate made a few notes to himself in a leisurely manner, and then raised his head to look at Mr. Grove. "Do you wish to respond to Mr. Zenas's witness, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Grove raised one eyebrow. "Is there reason I should wish to do so?" he asked in good Yclau.

"You might want to counter any slanders placed against your father," the magistrate suggested dryly.

Scrutinizing Mr. Grove carefully, Weldon tried to pretend to a professional indifference to the man's presence, but it was not easy. Yclau magistrates were inclined to place heavy emphasis upon the witnesses of kin to possible murder victims. Indeed, Layle had once told Weldon that he believed it was the accusatory witness of Elsdon's father that had caused the magistrate to sentence Elsdon Taylor to death.

This was a different case than that one had been, Weldon reminded himself. Elsdon had attacked, not his father, but his sister, and he had been unable to prove at his trial that there was a direct connection between his murder and his father's abuse of him. In this case, it was clear that Zenas had killed Mr. Hallam in an attempt to save his own life.

At least, that fact was clear to Weldon. He could only hope that it was clear to the magistrate now nudging Mr. Grove to provide witness against Zenas.

Mr. Grove raised a second eyebrow. "I heard no slander," he replied. "I heard a slave confess that he killed his master in cold blood."

Restless shifting could be heard throughout the room. From the corner of his eye, Weldon saw that the Queen's guards were exchanging looks with one another at this evidence of Vovimian barbarity. The magistrate's expression did not change.

"Very well," he said, "if you have no further witness to give, then we may proceed to the sentencing. Mr. Chapman, will I be saving your breath if I assume that your High Seeker wishes to keep this prisoner eternally confined?" His voice had turned dry again.

Weldon felt the words like a blow to the stomach. They were clear indication of how the magistrate planned to sentence Zenas. No doubt the magistrate had decided to give Zenas the highest sentence possible as a way to bypass Mr. Grove's attempts to overrule the magistrate's decision through a request for extradition.

"Yes, sir." Weldon did his best to keep his voice professionally calm. "The High Seeker believes that would be the best course in this case."

The magistrate tapped his pen to free the ink at its nib before writing something down. Without looking up, he said, "It is the Eternal Dungeon's privilege to make such a claim on the prisoner, of course. However, I should inform you that, if the Eternal Dungeon claims this prisoner for eternal confinement, I will ask the Queen to overrule the decision. By law, eternal confinement can only be offered to prisoners in cases where the Eternal Dungeon believes that the prisoner should be searched for evidence of further crimes. No evidence has been offered at this trial that the prisoner has committed any other crime than the one of which he is accused. Do you wish to proffer such evidence, Mr. Chapman, or, alternatively, do you wish to spare the Queen the trouble of deciding between your claim upon the prisoner and mine?" He raised his head and gave Weldon a sharp stare.

"Sir, the Eternal Dungeon withdraws its claim upon the prisoner."

He heard his own words as from a distance. They came automatically to him, the product of years of training himself to obey his superiors in the Eternal Dungeon. The High Seeker had ordered him to release the prisoner in a case like this, and so he would.

Yet even as he spoke, he knew that this was not the end of the matter. He knew, like a man meeting his fate, that when the time came for the Queen's guards to take the prisoner to be hanged, he would break his oath as a Seeker and fight to save Zenas's life. He knew that his battle would fail and that he would be tried for treason. He knew that he would die.

All this came to him in an instant, and was accepted by him in an instant. He felt an easiness fall over him as all the deep unhappiness he had felt since his son's death dropped away.

He looked at Zenas, feeling pity swell in him. Sweet blood, if there were only some way to save the boy. But in a room filled with the Queen's guards, there was no chance of that. The only thing he could do was show Zenas that someone besides his father cared enough to fight for him, and to die for him. He must hope that would be enough to bring about the transformation that the boy deserved to undergo before his death.

The magistrate coughed, and Weldon realized that he had allowed his attention to stray. He looked back at Mr. Jones and discovered that the

magistrate had a small, tight smile on his lips.

For a moment, Weldon felt only incredulity that one of the Queen's magistrates would allow himself to depart so much from his duty as to smile at the death of a prisoner. Then, in one of those lightning-quick moments of insight that allowed Weldon to work as a Seeker, he realized that Zenas was not the one on trial here at all. Weldon was on trial, and he had just passed his test.

The magistrate allowed the smile to fade as he turned toward Mr. Grove. "Sir," he said, "I intend to sentence Mr. Zenas to be confined to the Eternal Dungeon until he is eighteen. At that time, by Yclau law, he will be an adult and will have the opportunity, should he wish, to fight any attempts made to extradite him to his own country. Do you wish to protest this decision?"

Mr. Grove stared at the magistrate. Leaning forward, onto his walking stick, he said with raised voice, "This is justice? A slave stabs to death his master, and you call this justice?"

"It is justice in accordance with Yclau law." The magistrate's voice was once more dry.

Mr. Grove continued to stare, and Weldon noticed that one of the Queen's guards had stepped closer, his hand on his sword hilt, in case trouble should arise. Then Mr. Grove shrugged.

"Well," he said, rising to his feet, "I will return home and tell my mother of your decision. She knows the reputation of the Eternal Dungeon. Perhaps this will satisfy her."

"Good," said the magistrate briskly. He glanced at the clock in the corner of the room, grimaced at what he read from its dial, and slammed his papers into a stack in a manner that cut short Mr. Draper's whisper of translation and caused the prisoner to jump. "Zenas Hallam," the magistrate said, barely glancing at his prisoner, "I find you guilty of defensive murder, and I sentence you to six years' imprisonment in the Eternal Dungeon. I think we have enough time before the Queen's speech to catch a quick lunch, don't you?" He glanced at his recorder, who nodded,

and the two of them exited through the back door of the room. The Queen's guard melted away.

Weldon was glad that the hood hid his face. His jaw hung slack in a most unprofessional manner as he watched Mr. Grove quietly gather together his gloves and hat. Then another lightning-quick insight reached Weldon.

Mr. Grove had left home the moment he reached the Vovimian age of adulthood. He had not only left home, he had left his native land and had lived in Yclau ever since then. And when Mr. Hallam had arrived at the Queen's palace, after nine years of being apart from his son, Mr. Grove had been unable to find the time to visit him.

What had taken place between Mr. Grove and his father to cause Mr. Grove to flee so far? Whatever had occurred, Mr. Grove apparently possessed enough sense of duty toward his mother to make a token attempt to bring her husband's killer to justice.

But no more than a token attempt. Seeing the relaxed manner in which Mr. Grove collected his belongings, Weldon guessed that, in six years' time, Mr. Grove would make no attempt to force Zenas back to Yclau. Provided that Zenas stayed in Yclau, he would be safe from Vovim's unforgiving system of judgment.

Mr. Grove caught Weldon's eye on him and gave him a curt nod. "I thank you, sir, for your willingness to take upon yourself the troublesome burden of a disobedient slave. Zenas, you will follow whatever orders you are given by your torturer." He added something in the old tongue, presumably the same words as he had just spoken.

Zenas, who had just finished listening to Mr. Draper translate the final moments of the proceedings, went rigid at Mr. Grove's words. He looked over at Weldon and made a soft inquiry.

"He wishes to know whether he might be permitted to speak with his master's son," the translator explained.

Weldon hesitated, and then beckoned to his guards, who were still waiting in the corner of the room. Weldon guessed they were there simply out of curiosity to see the end of this drama, for any prisoner who was offered

confinement within the Eternal Dungeon did not require guards thereafter. No prisoner would be offered eternal confinement if he required guards.

Mr. Boyd and Mr. Crofford stepped forward to stand by Mr. Grove. Weldon was pleased to see that their eyes were on the ambassador's son rather than on Zenas as the boy approached. Zenas kept his gaze on Mr. Grove's face until he reached the Vovimian man. Then he knelt down and said something quietly, his head bowed. The ambassador's son replied, without any note of anger in his tone. Zenas nodded to what was said and retreated on his knees. When Zenas finally rose and turned, Weldon saw that tears stained his face.

"What did you say to him?" he asked Mr. Grove sharply.

Mr. Grove shrugged. "He asked my forgiveness for murdering his father. I told him the truth, that he would be racked by Hell eternally for what he had done." He gave a bow to Weldon, saying, "I do not believe that the boy will be of any further trouble to you. Good day to you, sir."

Weldon was hard pressed in the next few seconds to keep to his Seekerly training rather than revert to the older customs whereby, as a youth, he would have treated such remarks. He contented himself with silently watching Mr. Grove leave the judging room. He suspected that even a Vovimian would find it disconcerting to have his exit scrutinized by a mute, hoodless man.

Once the Vovimian was gone, Weldon let out his breath, beckoned to the translator, and began to make his way toward the door.

He heard a sound behind him, like the light mew of a forgotten kitten. He turned. Zenas remained where he had been before, near the guards; he was making no effort to follow. In a voice so soft that Weldon could barely hear him, he said something.

Weldon looked over at the translator. Mr. Draper said, "He begs your pardon for his importunate enquiry, but he wishes to know whether it is possible that you will be able to stay with him during the execution, as you had indicated you might – or so he had thought, but he begs your forgiveness if he misunderstood what you said earlier."

Weldon stared at Mr. Draper. "Didn't you translate to him the magistrate's sentence?"

Mr. Draper simply shrugged, as though suggesting the difficulties of translating Yclau into so complex a language as the old tongue.

Weldon returned his gaze to Zenas. The boy had his arms crossed and pressed hard against his chest, as though he were standing naked in deep snow and endeavoring to keep warm. His breath was rapid. But he made no further plea; he merely waited for Weldon's decision.

Weldon walked forward slowly, accompanied by the translator. When they reached Zenas, Weldon caught Mr. Boyd's eye. The senior guard promptly pulled Mr. Crofford out of the room, muttering something to the other guard about an opportunity to attend the Queen's speech. Zenas watched them go, his brow puckering with puzzlement.

"Mr. Draper," said Weldon, "please tell Mr. Zenas that he will not die. The magistrate has decided that he should live in the Eternal Dungeon until he is an adult. Explain that to him. If you can," he added, giving the translator the hard stare he reserved for guards who had neglected their duty.

The Vovimian translator seemed amused by the reproof. With a quirk of a smile, he spoke in the old tongue to Zenas.

Weldon saw the news reach the boy like a blow. Zenas sucked in his breath, held it, and then quickly made an enquiry. The translator considered this question a moment, and then evidently decided that further attempts at translation would go to naught, for he nodded his reply.

Zenas sank to his knees. Taking Weldon's hand, he said something soft, his gaze fixed upon Weldon. Mr. Draper reported, "He knew from the moment he met you that you were a messenger from Mercy herself. He swears to you that he will serve you with loyalty, body and soul, and that you need never fear that he will bring shame to your household as he did to his old one. He will do all that you require of him and never protest."

Weldon felt as though he had taken a blow as well. He opened his mouth, and then realized that any words he spoke now would be with shaken breath. He waited until his heart had calmed somewhat before saying, "Tell

him— No, it will be easier to show him. Tell him only that he need not kneel to me. That is not the custom here."

The translator reported this to the boy, who quickly scrambled to his feet, murmuring an acknowledgment of the order. Weldon did not await a translation but instead turned to the translator. "Mr. Draper, do you have time enough to return to the Eternal Dungeon?"

Scorning so much as a glance at the great Yclau clock hanging on the wall, Mr. Draper brought out his pocket-watch and peered at it. "If it does not take long," he responded. "I am due to begin my translation of the Queen's speech presently."

"I have only brief need of your services," Weldon assured him. "Come." This time he took care to beckon Zenas.

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Dungeon custom required that prisoners who had been offered confinement to the Eternal Dungeon be permitted to walk back unescorted, leading their own path to their new home. Weldon attempted to do this, but every time he allowed his pace to lag behind Zenas's, the boy would slow down until he was walking a pace behind Weldon. Finally Weldon surrendered and placed his arm round Zenas's shoulder so that they walked together. Mr. Draper glanced at them with curiosity, but made no comment.

Fortunately, they met no one on their way; this part of the palace, being an annex of the dungeon, was reserved for use by the inner dungeon inhabitants and the Queen's guards. Weldon dropped his arm from Zenas before they reached within sight of the guards at the gates to the Eternal Dungeon, so as not to give the guards heart attacks. The great gates – barred, not solid, in order to permit the maximum amount of air into the dungeon – swung open as the guards sighted Zenas. Belatedly, the guards noticed Weldon and nodded their greeting to him.

The steps down to the dungeon's entry hall were dark and silent; the light from the palace corridor did not travel far, and nothing could be heard from below. Zenas's step had slowed. Weldon knew that he must be remembering his terrifying entry into this dungeon: the dim entry hall, the

guards emerging from the darkness and placing an eyeless hood over his head, the light-mute march to his cell where unknown horrors awaited him. Weldon looked over at Zenas and saw that the boy was breathing rapidly, like a small animal trying to keep itself from bolting.

Suddenly there was the sound of scraping metal, and a small light flared in the darkness. One of the guards hidden in the shadows below had recognized Zenas and had realized that this was not a new prisoner approaching, but an old one. Within seconds, all of the shutters on the lamps had been lifted, and though the light did not reach the high ceiling above where the bats slept at this time of day, the floor below was cheery with brightness. Weldon heard an approving murmur from the guards in the entry hall as Zenas made his way cautiously down the steps, staring at the guards.

Weldon smiled as he guided Zenas up to the desk of the Record-keeper, who was pretending that he had no interest in anything other than the ledger-book he was jotting in. As they reached his desk, the Record-keeper looked up and put his hand enquiringly on the thin stack of forms nearby, bearing Zenas's name.

Weldon shook his head. "He has been sentenced to six years' imprisonment here," he said, raising his voice so that the guards could hear.

Another approving murmur filled the entry hall. The Eternal Dungeon was full of men and women who had received eternal confinement as a form of penance for their crimes, as well as Seekers like Weldon who had voluntarily chosen eternal confinement in order to become Seekers. For such men and women, eternal confinement was a comfort, or a duty willingly taken. But to the average guard, who came and went as he pleased between the dungeon and the lighted world, eternal confinement was a fate only one step less than death. In six years, Zenas would be free again to re-enter the lighted world; Weldon could almost hear the collective sigh of relief.

The Record-keeper lifted his eyebrows at the news of this unorthodox sentence. He pulled away the papers containing the oath of eternal confinement and pushed forward a bound volume. "In that case," he said,

"he need only sign the book." He opened the guest book to the appropriate page.

Weldon picked up the pen and looked over at Mr. Draper. "Can he write?"

Mr. Draper's snort of amusement shot through the entry hall, causing the sleepy bats above to flutter their wings. Startled, Zenas looked up toward the darkness as Weldon leaned forward, dipped the pen in the Record-keeper's inkwell, and wrote the date and Zenas's first name. Then he signed Zenas's name a second time, this time in the Vovimian alphabet. Mr. Draper gave a second snort, but this one did not sound as though it held any contempt.

Weldon attracted Zenas's attention back from the bats and indicated, through gesture, that he wished Zenas to mark the book with an X. Zenas did this without so much as blotting the ink. As he put down the pen, he looked at Weldon, evidently seeking a sign that he had done his duty correctly. Weldon nodded, wishing that his hood did not hide his smile. With a gesture, he escorted Zenas and Mr. Draper to a small, inconspicuous door on the right wall of the entry hall.

They entered a dimly lit corridor running left to right. The left end of the corridor led to most of the Seekers' cells, but Weldon turned right. Leaving behind the roar of furnaces belching out smoke into the corridor, they soon reached the more subtle sound of sliding metal. To their right, immediately adjacent to the entry hall, came a large doorway, shut with glass as though it were a department store's picture window. Weldon was not surprised when Zenas stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the room beyond the glass. Weldon had done the same, the first time he had seen the Lungs of the Eternal Dungeon.

At first glance, they looked like nothing other than an ordinary engine, but a longer look revealed that the accordion-like apparatus within the great room was releasing no steam. Its power came from steam engines high up in the palace, beyond the reaches of the Eternal Dungeon. Here could be seen only the root-tips of the vast machinery that kept the dungeon alive: the collapsing accordion here existed, not to create power, but to give life.

With one, powerful expansion, the right-hand Lung sucked in air from the lighted world. Then the Lung collapsed, sending the air to the interior

sections of the dungeon, through a complex system of ducts. At the same moment, the left-hand Lung pulled in bad air from the dungeon and exhaled it into the lighted world. Smoothly the two Lungs worked, never tiring, never ceasing to gift the dungeon with the air it needed to survive.

Weldon had been a resident of the outer dungeon one very bad day in his thirty-second year when the Lungs broke down and the dungeon had to be hastily evacuated, prisoners and all. He had been left with an acute consciousness of how much the dungeon's warren of rooms and lights and other benefits of modern civilization depended upon the raw power of Yclau's industrial revolution.

Zenas, coming from a land where such a revolution did not yet exist, stared wide-eyed at this evidence of the sophistication of his new home. Weldon was disposed to let the boy watch as long as he wished, but he could see the translator checking his watch, so he carefully guided Zenas away. Zenas came without struggle, refraining even from looking back at the wonder behind him.

They turned left soon after that, making their way down another dim corridor, less smoky than the previous one. Ahead of them, light chatter emerged from the Seekers' common room. Weldon could hear Elsdon's voice among those of the other Seekers who took night duty and were therefore enjoying their leisure hours now, in the daytime. He found himself remembering the conversation he had held with Elsdon the previous day.

"I thought my father could do no wrong," the junior Seeker had told Weldon. "And then, for a while, I thought the High Seeker could do no wrong. If Layle had not possessed the courage and generosity to reveal his frailties to me, my slavish devotion to him would have become just as dangerous as my slavish devotion to my father. Layle saved me from that."

They were halfway down the corridor now. Weldon stopped at a door, unlocked it, and pushed it open.

His living quarters were dark, and it took him a moment to find the matches and to light the oil lamp. In the lighted world, some households were beginning to use gas lamps, but such lamps would have been far too dangerous within the confined spaces of the dungeon. Even oil lamps had

their dangers; Weldon paused a moment to do his twice daily check that the vents to the ducts remained unblocked. He had never found the vents obscured, but he always checked, having known one of the outer dungeon dwellers who died from bad fumes when a careless maid moved a trunk in front of the dwellers' vent.

He found himself looking critically at the room when he finished. This being a home with no windows, the oil lamps' soot lay twice as thick upon the walls as it would have in a home in the lighted world. He had become resigned long ago to the fact that no amount of energetic scrubbing by the outer dungeon's maids could keep his cell as clean as his parents' home had been. He could only hope that his cell did not look too dingy to a child. He switched his gaze to Zenas to check whether the boy Seemed disappointed.

Zenas was not looking at the dirt, nor at anything else in the living area. His gaze was fixed upon the curtain to the alcove, which was open just wide enough to reveal the stuffed lion cub.

Weldon carefully drew the curtain back and waved Zenas in. Zenas approached the room cautiously, looking round at the other toys, but his eye returned to the cub. He came up close to it, and for a moment it appeared that he would touch it. Then he hastily stepped back and directed a question at Weldon.

"He wishes to know whether this room belongs to your son, and whether it is your son that you wish him to serve," explained Mr. Draper.

Weldon had to take a moment to swallow before answering. "Tell him that this room belonged to my son when he was alive. Tell him that my son died a month ago."

He could tell the moment at which the news was conveyed to Zenas, from the manner in which the boy's face grew grave. In a somber voice, Zenas said something. Mr. Draper translated, "He is grieved to hear of your great loss and wishes to know whether he might do anything for you to ease your sorrow."

Already, Weldon noticed, the boy was picking at the clasps of his shirt, but tentatively, awaiting the appropriate order. Weldon took a deep breath.

"Tell him," he said, "that I have no need for a slave, no need for a beloved in that sense." He saw Zenas's fingers flick open the first clasp as the boy heard the word *chau*, but Zenas halted again as Weldon continued, "Tell him that I have no need of a slave, but I have very great need of a son. Tell him that I have brought him here so that he can be my beloved son."

Mr. Draper translated rapidly. Zenas looked from Weldon to Mr. Draper, and then shook his head. He said something briefly.

The translator shrugged. "He does not believe me," he reported to Weldon. "He thinks I have misunderstood you."

Weldon sighed. "How do I tell him myself?"

It took five minutes of whispers between the two of them for Weldon to reach the point where he could produce something that vaguely resembled the old tongue. By the time he was through, he held greater respect than he had before for the translator's linguistic abilities. Coming forward to where Zenas awaited him, his fingers still resting upon his shirt clasps, Weldon said, "Zenas, I am your father. *Papa tos suum, Zenas.*"

The hand on Zenas's clasps went suddenly still. For a minute more nothing happened, until Weldon was ready to turn to Mr. Draper and ask him what an appalling mess he had made in his attempt to speak the boy's language. Then he noticed that Zenas was biting his lip, and his chin was quivering.

Weldon reached over and took the cub, then carefully placed it in the boy's arms. Kneeling down, he said softly, *"Zenas, papa tos suum."*

His back was to the translator; as he spoke, he raised his hood so that Zenas could see the tears underneath. He made no attempt to hide them. This was his gift to the boy: a gift he had begun to give in the youth's cell and would give every day of his life, for as long as Zenas needed him. Whatever other follies he had committed, Weldon was determined that Zenas should know that he was a fallible man, with frailties as great as Zenas's.

The boy's breath caught. With the hand not clutching the cub, he reached out and touched one of the tears on Weldon's face. Then, in a choked voice, he said, *"Ador te suum, Papa."* He flung himself into Weldon's arms.

Behind them, the translator reported, "He says he loves you."

"I know," Weldon said in a low voice as he embraced Zenas. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Draper. I think that my son and I will be able to communicate from this time forth. I hope," he added out of customary politeness, "that I have not made you miss the Queen's speech."

"Mr. Chapman," replied the translator in a voice holding neither amusement nor contempt, "I would have missed a dozen speeches by both your Queen and my King for the opportunity to have witnessed this. This will give me something appropriate to say when I return home this summer and must listen to my family drone on about the barbarities of the Yclau."

Weldon waited until the door had shut behind the translator; then he turned his head so that he could kiss Zenas on the cheek. The boy was quiet in his arms now, and there was a smile on his face.

o—o—o

They were still sitting together on the floor an hour later when the door opened again, and a familiar voice said, "Weldon, you're here, aren't you? I met with the High Seeker; he spoke to me at length about your latest prisoner and said that you would be here afterwards, because he had granted you day-leave to rest after the boy's trial. I trust that you were able to save the poor child? —By all that's sacred, you must be here somewhere." Birdesmond's voice lowered to a murmur as she moved to another part of the house, searching. "I hope you're home, because I had a brawling fight with Mother this morning when I discovered she hadn't been posting my letters to you, and then I spent three hours tangled in traffic in a dusty tram. All I want to do now is take a long, cool bath and then go to bed with y— Why, what is this?"

As she spoke, Birdesmond reached the entrance to the alcove and saw Weldon and Zenas on the floor. Her hand went rapidly up to lower the face-cloth of her hood, and then just as rapidly dropped. Custom demanded that Seekers cover their faces even in the presence of a strange child, but Weldon's wife had never been one to follow custom when it went against her instincts.

Zenas twisted in Weldon's arms to look at him. *"Mama?"* he asked.

"Yes." Weldon nodded. "This is your *mama*, your mother. Go and greet her."

He gently pushed the boy onto his feet. Birdesmond, always the quicker-witted of the two of them, was already down on one knee, her skirt swept back and her arms reaching out.

Zenas walked forward cautiously, as he had when re-entering the dungeon. His gaze was fixed upon Birdesmond's face. Then he appeared to reach a decision, for he rushed into Birdesmond's arms, cub and all.

Weldon rose to his feet. When Birdesmond raised her face from Zenas's shoulders, her eyelashes sparkled with moisture. "You've been busy while I've been gone," she said softly to her husband.

"I'm afraid so." Weldon smiled back at her. "A prisoner had need of us."

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o—o—o

. . . The Eternal Dungeon's documents record many examples of this personal assistance. As a single example, I may cite the case of the man known to history simply as Zenas.

In the many biographies written about Zenas, it is generally noted in passing that Zenas spent his early youth in the Eternal Dungeon. This is treated as a subject of little interest. Instead, the authors imply that the most important years of his life came during his childhood, when he endured great brutality as a Vovimian slave, and during his manhood, when he returned to Vovim and took on the veil of the *aekae*. Thus garbed, he began his mighty work as one of the prophets of Vovim, denouncing the rich and powerful. His words were said to be all the more effective because they came from a man clearly possessed with the qualities of modesty, humility, and gentleness. These qualities, accompanied by a fierce desire to bring an end to the suffering of the oppressed, proved to be a pivotal factor in the eventual downfall of the old Vovimian monarchy and the rise of the new Vovimian government, which abolished slavery and other atrocities in that land.

It is usually implied by Zenas's biographers that the prophet acquired these characteristics during his childhood, and that his time spent in the Eternal Dungeon was merely a detour on his road to greatness. Yet we may note that, while Zenas never returned to Yclau, he remained in correspondence with his adopted parents until the ends of their lives, and that he spoke often of the Eternal Dungeon as the place where "the gods taught me my future." Whether the Seekers had a part to play in the gods' teachings, Zenas did not say, but any historian of the Eternal Dungeon cannot help but be struck by the similarities between the transformation that the Eternal Dungeon sought to bring to its prisoners and the transformation that Zenas successfully brought to his native land.

Readers of this volume may wonder at this point why I have taken so wide a detour of my primary subject. The title of this volume is "Transformation," yet most of the transformations I have described took place outside the boundaries of the Eternal Dungeon, and any connections between the Seekers and the men and women who wrought such change were important but brief.

The reason I have spent so much time dwelling on these incidents is that we must place the Seekers' work in its proper perspective. The Eternal Dungeon did not invent the concept of transformation, nor was a single man in the Eternal Dungeon responsible for the adaptation of that idea to the use of transforming the hearts and minds of prisoners. Indeed, many books have been written about the history of the term "transformation" in Yclau's native religion, a religion that long preceded the arrival of the Eternal Dungeon. To suggest that one person in the Eternal Dungeon was the sole creator of transformation is to give him more credit than he deserves.

That said, there is no doubt that a particular technique of transformation was born in the Eternal Dungeon. Unlike the other transformations I have mentioned, this technique went unnoted by the chroniclers of its time. No newspaper mentioned it; even Weldon Chapman, the contemporary historian of the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon, left out all mention of it in his writings.

Yet this technique of transformation would, in the long run, have as great an effect on the world as the uprisings and revolutions I have mentioned.

Thanks to the documents that Weldon Chapman collected for posterity, we know the origins of this technique, and we therefore know that it was invented by a single man.

Thus it is that we must return to the tale of Layle Smith.

In the third month of 359, eight months after Zenas's arrival at the Eternal Dungeon, eighteen months after Layle Smith began to emerge from his Second Madness, and nearly three years after Layle Smith's mental instability first made itself apparent, the Codifier wrote the following words in a page of his record book: "Due to Mr. Smith's continued refusal to return to his duties in searching prisoners, I have advised the Queen that Mr. Smith should be relieved of his title as High Seeker and be required to enter into retirement."

The rest of the page is blank, like a breath being held.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Transformation 4
THE CONSULTATION

The year 359, the third month.

Recently, revisionist historians – rightly recoiling from the smothering effusiveness of early biographies of Layle Smith – have suggested a very different portrait of the Eternal Dungeon's first High Seeker. They depict Layle Smith as a cold-hearted murderer and rapist who reached his exalted title as a result of chance and who remained, to his dying day, a dangerous and unscrupulous man, feared by all who met him.

Ironically, the primary evidence for this portrait is drawn from Layle Smith's indictments of himself in his letters. To sense how far his self-image lay from reality, we need only read the most important eyewitness account of Layle Smith's First Madness.

This account comes from the Codifier, the man who supervised the ethical conduct of the Seekers at the time of Layle Smith's High Seekership.

Excerpts from the undated entries of his official records follow hereafter.

* Report from Mr. Sobel [a guard] that Mr. Smith, while supervising the beating of a prisoner, seemed suddenly unaware of his surroundings. Mr. Sobel was alerted to this fact because Mr. Smith had been speaking words of comfort to the prisoner in the midst of the prisoner's pain. Mr. Sobel says that he has known Mr. Smith to have moments of unawareness in the past, but never to the point where it caused him to neglect his duty. Request from Mr. Smith shortly thereafter to receive discipline for his neglect of duty. Request denied; matter referred over to Mr. Bergsen [the dungeon's physician].

* Report from Mr. Bergsen that he has been unable to assist Mr. Smith in the matter of his dreaming spells and that Mr. Smith's problem appears to be worsening.

* Report from Mr. Sobel that Mr. Smith, on the point of entering his prisoner's cell at his usual time of duty, suddenly refused to enter, stating that he was a danger to the prisoners. Request from Mr. Smith that he be given leave of absence from his duties. Request approved. Dungeon temporarily placed under the care of Mr. Chapman [Weldon Chapman, a Seeker of senior rank].

* Report from several of the inner dungeon dwellers that Mr. Smith's condition is affecting his ability to communicate with the other Seekers and the guards. Mr. Bergsen has requested permission to bring in healers from the palace to examine Mr. Smith more closely. Request approved.

* Report from Mr. Bergsen that the consultation with the other healers proved fruitless. Request from Mr. Smith to be permanently released from his duties as Seeker and given duties in the outer dungeon that would not bring him into contact with the prisoners. Request denied. Have bound Mr. Smith into the care of Mr. Taylor [Elsdon Taylor, a Seeker]. Mr. Smith has been confined to his living quarters except when accompanied by Mr. Taylor.

* Report from Mr. Bergsen that Mr. Smith's condition is worsening; his spells are now occurring several times a day. Mr. Bergsen does not believe that Mr. Smith is likely to become violent. He says that the problem is just the opposite, that Mr. Smith is withdrawing from this world. Mr. Taylor reports that Mr. Smith continues to abide by the conditions of his binding.

* Mr. Chapman has voiced his opinion that the burden placed upon Mr. Taylor is too great and has asked to be released from some of his own duties in order to assist with Mr. Smith's care. Request approved. Mr. Taylor, when asked, has expressed the desire to continue searching his present prisoner. He reports that, when Mr. Smith is present at the searching, he remains silent. Mr. Taylor also reports that the prisoner is showing unprecedented amounts of sympathy and concern as a result of his witness of Mr. Smith's illness. Have requested Mr. Taylor to send this office daily reports on the condition of Mr. Smith.

* Have received numerous requests from the other Eternal Dungeon dwellers to be of assistance in Mr. Smith's case. Have arranged for the Record-keeper to issue daily reports to the senior Seekers. Mr. Bergsen, Mr. Chapman, and Mr. Taylor all report that Mr. Smith's condition continues to decline. He is now spending more than half his waking hours in his dreamings.

* Request from Mr. Smith to be confined to a locked cell, as he believes himself to be a danger to the dungeon dwellers. Request denied. Have given Mr. Taylor permission to take any steps he considers necessary to assist Mr. Smith.

* Hourly reports are being issued by the Record-keeper on Mr. Smith's condition. The Queen has been informed.

* We have lost him.

The last, heartbreaking entry is in such stark contrast to the Codifier's usual formal style that it provides a striking image of the depth of respect that Layle Smith's fellow workers held for him. Unfortunately, the Codifier was apparently so deeply troubled by the High Seeker's illness

that this is his last entry on the topic. Thus we are deprived of his account of Layle Smith's struggle back to sanity.

Revisionist historians have suggested that Layle Smith's "recovery" consisted of him passing from a coma-like state into a far more dangerous psychotic condition, in which he fully accepted the "dark dreamings" that apparently sparked the madness. From this point forward, the revisionist historians say, Layle Smith lost all sense of reality and became a destructive influence upon the Eternal Dungeon.

This charge, resting as it does purely on speculation, cannot be easily refuted. Nonetheless, it is possible for more conscientious historians to reconstruct the steps Layle Smith took to emerge from his madness . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

His duties had occasionally taken him to other dungeons and prisons in the world; the conditions in these less sophisticated places for searching prisoners had always made him wince. He had done his best to find tactful ways to suggest changes, and such was his reputation that sometimes his advice was taken. After all, the torturers told themselves, it is one thing to receive recommendations on prison reform from some soft clerk who has never in his life worked with stone-hearted prisoners. It is quite another thing to receive such recommendations from the High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon.

Never before, though, had Layle Smith visited a dungeon that smelled so appalling. He paused for a moment as the boom of the great iron doors closing behind him echoed through the room. Some of the smells he recognized: blood, of course, and human waste – that was to be expected. Even back home, where the laborers were fanatical in their efforts to keep the Eternal Dungeon clean, these normal prison smells lingered on. Yet there was more here than the usual noxious fumes. He thought he smelled rotting food and vomit and another smell that tickled at his memory in a pleasant manner – which worried him.

He swallowed his instinctive reaction to the smells; he would not make a good impression here by throwing up on the threshold, and it was becoming increasingly clear how important it was that he make a good impression. This was a dungeon whose torturers were badly in need of being made to see that effective methods of preventing lawbreaking need not be incompatible with acts of humanity toward prisoners.

He looked around the room he was in. Never before had he seen an entry hall that was so crowded with prisoners; new arrivals seemed to be streaming in at each moment. They were dragged to the record-keeper's desk, where the record-keeper would give them no more than a glance before assigning them a cell. Then they would be dragged off – one of the women prisoners was dragged off by her hair, Layle noticed with anger. This place was worse than any prison he had ever visited, since he left Vovim.

He elbowed his way past a guard who was bashing a screaming prisoner over the head with a club, and managed to make his way up to the front of the desk. Murmuring an apology to a prisoner who was cowering before the record-keeper, he said, "I am Layle Smith. I was asked to come here for a consultation."

The record-keeper flicked his pen into the inkwell nearby before looking up and saying, "Ah, yes, Master Layle, we've been awaiting you."

"Mr. Smith," he corrected politely.

"Really?" The record-keeper pulled a paper in front of him. "It says here you received your training at the Hidden Dungeon."

He felt himself tense, but after all, it had been his own decision three years ago to release the information of where his origins lay. "I was only at Vovim's royal dungeon until I was eighteen," he said. "I had not yet been granted the title of master when I left. I completed my training at Yclau's Eternal Dungeon, where I received my full rank. I am addressed there as Mr. Smith."

"Mm." The record-keeper started to make a notation on the paper, then stopped with a curse and flung his pen down. "Get me more ink!" he shouted at a cringing page-boy, who scurried off.

"Right," the record-keeper said, fishing into his drawer. "The prisoner is in Cell 43,516. You'll be assigned your living quarters later. Your shift runs from midnight to dusk."

Layle did not move to take the iron key that the record-keeper had placed before him. "It appears a misunderstanding has occurred," he said quietly. "I am here for a consultation only. My position remains at the Eternal Dungeon."

"According to my records, you've been assigned a prisoner. Your shift will be starting soon; you'd better go check your equipment."

Layle sighed. Record-keepers were the same everywhere. If they read something on a piece of paper, they thought it must be true. "Sir, I think I'd best speak with your head torturer now."

"The High Master is busy. He's always busy. Complaints about work conditions should be delivered in writing to the communications committee, which will act upon them when appropriate." The record-keeper turned his head toward the page, who was returning to the desk.

The page was pulling behind him a girl who was even younger than himself, perhaps six years of age. She was crying and saying, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt those puppies! I'm sorry!"

The record-keeper ignored her cries. He grabbed the girl's arm and brought it down with a bang upon his desk. Then, with his free hand, he took up a sealing-wax knife and plunged it into the girl's arm.

The girl screamed and tried to escape from the arms of the page, who looked as though he would faint at any moment but was holding her tight. The record-keeper carefully turned the girl's arm and directed the spurting blood into the inkwell. His aim was true; not a drop escaped to spatter upon the desk. Once the inkwell was filled, he gestured to the page, who pulled the sobbing girl away into the crowd.

Layle had watched all this with the horrified fascination of a Seeker-in-Training witnessing the rack in use for the first time. Now he turned his attention back to the record-keeper and said evenly, "Is this a youth prison, sir?"

"We take anyone we are sent." The record-keeper dipped his pen in the blood and carefully wrote down Layle's proper title. "Mr. Smith, I'm rather busy today, as you can see. If you have any questions about your assignment, I can place you under the care of one of the master torturers here."

Layle looked over his shoulder. It had not seemed possible to him, when he first arrived, that more prisoners could fit into this hall, but while he had been talking to the record-keeper, the number of prisoners had doubled: they were squeezed tight against each other, like a pile of corpses crammed into a narrow grave. At the very edge of the hall, prisoners continued to pour in.

Layle turned back to the record-keeper. "I'm sure that I can sort this problem out with the assistance of the torturer you mention. I thank you

for your time and your help, sir."

The record-keeper gave him a curt nod. "Try Cell 1. You're certain to find someone there. Don't forget your key."

Layle scooped up the key, unwilling to cause further delay by argument. He nodded his farewell to the record-keeper and squeezed his way past the pleading prisoners in order to reach the low doorway through which prisoners were being thrust by their guards.

He ducked his head to pass through the arch, and then paused to take in his surroundings. Like the Eternal Dungeon, this dungeon was housed inside a natural underground cave, but whereas the engineers of the Eternal Dungeon had built cells and living quarters within the cave in the manner of the lighted world, the architects of this dungeon had apparently taken a more creative approach, using the natural architecture of the caverns themselves. The corridor in front of him was made of twisting rock, with an occasional stalactite hanging from above, threatening to knock unconscious any unwary traveller. It was not clear what the source of lighting was in this place; the entire corridor was glowing dimly, too faintly for Layle to be able to read by, but brightly enough for him to make his way. He thought perhaps it must be some sort of phosphorescence arising from the rocks themselves.

He found Cell 1 easily enough; it was the first door along the corridor. He hesitated at the entrance, but no guards stood outside the door. From the sounds throbbing through the thick door, he supposed the guards must be inside, assisting the torturer. He lifted the latch and walked in.

The torturer was indeed hard at work on a prisoner, and the sight of the prisoner alerted Layle to what smell had tickled his nose earlier. Of course, he thought. It had been over twenty years since he had walked in upon a scene like this, but his mind had remembered the smell of burning human flesh. That smell was quite common in the Hidden Dungeon.

This particular prisoner – who was alternating sobs with groans – was only being lightly roasted. She was bound in chains upon a grill encircling her, so that she could be slowly turned, each part of her body receiving the heat of the flames below her. It would take quite a while for her to break if she was roasted at this low level, Layle concluded. But then, he thought with

growing disgust, he had known torturers who preferred slow pain over hard pain. . . .

The torturer turned to look at the newcomer. He was a bearded man, broad-chested and tall, and with friendly brown eyes. He smiled and said, "Hello, Layle. Close the door, will you? I don't want the draft from the corridor to blow out this fire. It will take me just a minute to finish up here."

Layle stood motionless, every spoonful of blood in his body pounding madly in its race. He could feel his face turning cold as the blood drained away. The torturer turned back and said to the guard rotating the grill, "You're taking her too far. Pull the grill up a few notches and bank that fire. Then start again when she's ready."

The guard nodded and followed the instructions he had been given. The torturer picked up a cloak that was hanging from a hook nearby. Bits of flesh were hanging from the hook as well. He began to fling the heavy cloth over his shoulders, then glanced over at Layle and tossed him the cloak. "Here, they should have assigned you one of these. It can get a bit chilly here, unless you're working with a prisoner who requires fire."

Long training kept him from speaking while in the presence of a prisoner being searched for her crime, but the moment that the door of the warm cell closed, Layle stood motionless in the corridor and blurted out, "Master Aeden, what are you doing here?"

"My work," his old master from Vovim said with a smile. "What else would I be doing in the middle of a workday?"

"But I killed you!"

His master lifted an eyebrow. "In actual fact, you offered me the means to kill myself. But if you'd like to add murdering your master to the list of deeds your conscience tortures you about, you're welcome to do so. Do put that cloak on; this place will be colder further on."

Layle fumbled himself into the cloak. There was something about his master's presence that made him feel like a youth once more. As Layle finished, Master Aeden flung his arm over his shoulders and began to draw him down the corridor, saying, "By the torture-god of hell, it's good to see

you again, my dear! When I heard that you were coming here, it made my heart leap with joy."

Layle would not allow himself to be distracted. "Master," he said in a tight voice, "you died. I saw you plunge my dagger through your heart."

Master Aeden gave him an amused smile. "And did you check my heartbeat? Have a healer declare my death? Did you do *any* of the things I taught you to do if a prisoner gave you the impression that he'd killed himself?" At Layle's silence, Master Aeden sighed and added, "My dear, you may have risen high in the world since your days as my apprentice, but you still have much to learn. I think I can help you to complete your training here."

As he spoke, he drew Layle through an arched gap in the rocks. Beyond it was a small cavern with hundreds of stalactites hanging down. From each stalactite hung a body – a living body, writhing in its attempt to break free. No weights hung from the prisoners' feet; no scars marred their bodies. Nothing dragged the prisoners down toward mutilation or death. They were simply undergoing the usual sort of prolonged pain that accompanies being hung from a ceiling.

Layle stared upward, his mouth open at the sight of the hundreds of bodies flailing in the air, each crying out or groaning in its own manner. The prisoners were wearing the clothes they had evidently worn in the lighted world, for they spread in a multi-colored pattern across the ceiling of the cavern, as though they were a wildflower field.

He did not realize he had halted until he felt Master Aeden's hand urge him toward a doorway at the opposite end of the cavern. "Don't stop, my dear. I know that the cavern of hanging must be a delectable feast for you, but your shift will be starting soon, and I should brief you before that time."

The cries faded away behind them as they made their way through another corridor, this one leading downward at a steep slant. The air was growing more chill; ice began to glint upon the rocks, and Layle could just see the mist of his breath in the increasingly darkening surroundings.

"It should be warmer underground," he heard himself say. "That's one of the reasons we're able to save on winter fuel costs at the Eternal Dungeon."

"Is that so? You'll have to tell me about that – but we'll have plenty of time for chit-chat later. Here we are."

Master Aeden pushed open a door that led into what appeared to be a very small cell. It was not much different from the cells for prisoners at the Eternal Dungeon, though considerably more cramped: the room was barely big enough to accommodate the naked bedshelf. There was no chamber-pot; a plank on the ground suggested that a pit served this purpose. A few items were stowed under the bedshelf, mainly clothing.

"Nice, isn't it?" said Master Aeden, looking at his surroundings. "I was lucky to get a residence this large. I'm afraid that, as a newcomer, you'll have to put up with living quarters a little less luxurious. Do have a seat." He waved his hand at the bedshelf.

Layle sat down on the hard bed, which was made of the same rock as the remainder of the room and was painfully bumpy. "Sir," he said, trying to take on the cool tones of the High Seeker, "you seem to be under the same misapprehension as this dungeon's record-keeper. Much as I would like to spend time talking with you, I'm afraid I'm only here for a short visit. I was asked to come here for—"

"A consultation. Yes, I know." Master Aeden was crouched down, rummaging under the bedshelf. "Why don't I ever have the proper food ready when guests come by? I don't suppose you want any of this?"

He held up a dead rat. It had been skinned, but its tail had not been chopped off. Layle stared at it open-mouthed, his stomach heaving once more. Master Aeden sighed and tossed the rat under the bedshelf, saying, "No, I suppose not. It takes a while to get used to the food in this place. Honestly, I couldn't recommend this dungeon to any torturer for its amenities. But oh my dear, the work conditions . . . Now, about your consultation."

"You know about that," Layle said with relief.

"Certainly; the High Master spoke about it. Well, not to me, of course. I'm far too junior for that. He spoke to his secretary, who spoke to the liaison, who spoke to the communications committee, who spoke to me. They knew we'd worked together in the past, you see."

"And what does the High Master wish to consult me about?" Layle asked patiently, keeping his booted feet carefully far from under the bedshelf, lest he trample upon any of Master Aeden's food.

"A prisoner, naturally. We had a new one brought in the other day – he didn't look to the torturers who first searched him as though he would respond to the usual methods. Somebody suggested that the Eternal Dungeon has ways of dealing with prisoners that no other dungeon in the world has, so you were brought in, so that you can teach the rest of us how the Yclau torturers take care of their prisoners."

"The Yclau Seekers," Layle said quietly. "There's more to being a Seeker than simply torturing a prisoner."

"You see? We need you here; we're obviously neglecting important lessons that we can learn from the Yclau. I don't think we've ever had an Yclau torturer – sorry, Seeker – come to this place. They all seem to bypass this dungeon for some reason. Lots of other foreign arrivals, though. We're a popular destination."

"Well," said Layle, pulling the cloak closer to his body in an attempt to shield himself from the chill, "I'll be happy to demonstrate the Eternal Dungeon's methods of searching prisoners. I'm only sorry I didn't think to bring a copy of the *Code of Seeking* with me. I'll be sure to send your High Master a copy when I return home."

Master Aeden stared at him for a moment, and then laughed. "You seem very sure you'll be returning home soon. Do you think that your duty to your new prisoner will end that quickly?"

Layle hesitated before answering; he was taking in the eerie silence of this room. He was used to dungeons and prisons that were punctuated at intervals by screams, but he could only hear the faint sound of groans nearby. The part of him that remained always on-duty noted this fact and reached its conclusion: the low level of torture that he had hitherto seen in this place was not abnormal but common. For whatever reason, the torturers here were not permitted to take their prisoners to a high level of pain.

There were various possibilities for why this was so. He hoped consideration of the prisoners' welfare was the real reason.

"I don't want to underestimate the amount of time it would take to break a prisoner who has not responded to the efforts of your torturers," he said carefully. "That is particularly the case if the rules of this dungeon limit the amount of pain that can be used to bring the prisoner to the breaking point. But as I'm sure your High Master realizes, I cannot stay here for long. I have duties that must be tended to at home."

Master Aeden, who had been kneeling as he continued to rummage through the rubbish pile beneath the bedshelf, looked up at him. "I was told that the agreement made for your visit was that you would stay here until your work with this particular prisoner was through."

"I made no such agreement," Layle replied patiently.

"Our High Master seems to think you did. And our High Master is exacting about work terms being met."

His master rose to his feet. His smile had disappeared, and he looked down at Layle as he had on the day that the youth had finally accepted the limitations on his ability to find pleasure in bed. There was a small, chill silence.

"Sir," Layle said quietly, "is this dungeon under Vovimian control?"

Master Aeden gave a sad smile. "I'm afraid so, my dear. You know what that means: no torturer who comes here to work ever leaves. And I'm afraid you won't find it possible to escape this time. This place is tightly sealed, and they'll be on the alert for you."

Layle stood up slowly, his gaze travelling round the prison cell where his master was housed. He ought to have known from the moment he entered this cell, he thought to himself dully; he had lived in a cell like this during his years as a torturer in the Hidden Dungeon. But in those days he had been trusted enough to be permitted to leave the heavily guarded dungeon for occasional visits to nearby towns.

That was before he had broken his oath as a Vovimian torturer by fleeing to Yclau for sanctuary.

He looked over at his master and said in a level voice, "A death sentence was passed against me after I left Vovim. It won't be invoked?"

Master Aeden gave a wry smile. "Only in a manner of speaking. I'm sorry, my dear; I know that this must be a great shock to you, as it is to me."

"A great joy." His voice was harsh to his ears. "That's what you said you felt when you heard I was coming."

"Shall we say my feelings were mixed? I knew your transition here would be hard, but truly, Layle, I believe that this is the right dungeon for you. You'll find work conditions here much better than at our old dungeon – or, for that matter, than at the Eternal Dungeon."

Layle let out a deep breath and spent a moment walking the six paces possible from one end of the cell to the other. He placed his hand against the cell wall; it was as chill as a winter lake, numbing him the moment he touched it. He turned and pulled the cloak off, saying, "Here. You're older than I am; you're more likely to be affected by the cold."

Master Aeden's smile deepened. "You haven't changed. But I've grown used to the cold here, Layle. You keep the cloak till you're issued your own."

Layle shook his head, giving an incredulous laugh. "And if you die from a chill—"

"Not at all likely, as you'll discover when you come to know this dungeon better. That's one of the benefits of working here."

Layle felt his body beginning to tense, and he forced himself to relax. Placing the cloak at one end of the bedshelf, he reseated himself at the other end of the bed, saying, "Master, I know that I've never been able to make you see why I need to work at the Eternal Dungeon—"

"So? You have plenty of time to convince me now." Master Aeden sat down beside him and stretched out his legs with a sigh. "Ah, that's good. Dark-to-dark shifts exhaust me. . . . You were a youth when last we talked of the Eternal Dungeon, Layle. You're a full-grown man now, with a High Seeker's title to prove your worth. I'm more inclined to listen to what you have to say."

Layle laid his elbows upon his thighs for a minute, resting his chin upon his interlocked hands. Finally he said, "Very well, here's the image I'll use to describe it. You know the Vovimian hell, where the torture-god and his assistants punish the guilty for eternity?"

"I haven't forgotten it," Master Aeden replied with a smile.

"I was told as a child that this was justice, because only the guilty were punished, and their evil was so great that they deserved to endure pain forever. I always thought this was a fitting image for the Hidden Dungeon."

Master Aeden raised his eyebrows. "The prisoners at our old dungeon certainly didn't endure pain forever. Death awaited them."

"Yes, but the concept of destruction was the same. The evil would remain evil forever – there was no chance of transforming the prisoner to good. But in Yclau . . . They don't believe in eternal hell in Yclau; they believe in eternal rebirth."

His master leaned forward, interest written upon his face. "This is how the Eternal Dungeon got its name?"

Layle nodded. "We try to give our prisoners rebirth from an evil life into a good one. But in order to do that we must first break them away from their old life – there must be a breaking before there can be a birth. It's as though the prisoners were chicks within their shells, painfully pecking their way out. That's why we use torture when needed – because some prisoners require external pain to reach the point where they can recognize the evil of their past and transform themselves into good."

Master Aeden nodded. "So any torture that the Seekers inflict upon the prisoners is for the prisoners' sake alone."

"That's right."

"Mm." Master Aeden leaned back, stretching his legs out further so that his toes touched the icy wall. He wiggled his feet for a moment before saying, "Was I entering a dreaming, my dear, or did you go cock-high the moment we entered the cavern of hanging?"

Layle felt the blood wash from his face. His master glanced over at him and added, "Forgive me. That was a blow outside the rule-books."

"No, it's a fair question." He tried to keep his voice level. "You know I've always received pleasure from the sight of pain. That hasn't changed. I've tried various methods of handling my dark desire over the years, to stay within the Code I must abide by as a Seeker. None of the methods I've used included the method I employed in Vovim: simply allowing my dark desire to rule me, so that I tortured and raped prisoners to satisfy my lusts."

The master who had taught him these skills seemed not at all disturbed by this indictment of his training. "And have these methods of controlling your desire been successful?"

There was a long silence. Ice-water dripped from the ceiling, cascading into a pool near the pit. Finally Layle said, "So the news has reached this far."

Master Aeden gave him another of his sad smiles. "How could it not? When anything important happens to the High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon, every torturer in the world hears the tale." He reached forward and placed his hand over Layle's, saying quietly, "That's why I recommended to the High Master that you be brought here, my dear. Trying to follow the Code of the Eternal Dungeon has driven you mad before – I can't chance letting it happen again."

CHAPTER TWO

The High Seeker ran his thumb over the curve of the surface. The surface was chill and slick to the touch, and so transparent that he could see all that lay beneath it: the white skin of the prisoner encased in ice.

Layle's hand ran up the ice above the prisoner's chest; his eyes were taking in the signs of age upon the prisoner's body. Then he reached the throat, and his thumb halted. The ice curved with the throat, following the line of the prisoner's body as though the body wore tight clothing. Layle pressed his thumb more firmly against the ice.

It stung like a dozen bees upon his skin, but within seconds, water began to drip slowly down from where Layle's thumb heated the ice. After several more minutes, he had reached the whitened skin.

It felt chill as well, but it was warmer than the ice. Under his thumb came a faint beating, at slow, irregular intervals. He spent a moment calculating its rate from the regular rhythm of his own breath. Then he brushed his thumb across the skin, feeling the height of the goose-pimples there.

The throat moved slightly, embracing a swallow. He waited until the prisoner's swallow was gone, then closed his eyes and concentrated his hearing on the barely perceptible whisper of air emerging from the hole he had created: a breath, shallow, labored, coming at fitful intervals. Layle let his thumb slide away and he stepped back, frowning.

"Well?"

Layle glanced over his shoulder at his master. In this ice-covered cavern, the phosphorescent light was brighter than in the corridors outside, and Master Aeden's pupils were small spots against brown fields. Layle turned back to look at the prisoner. The man's whole body was encased in ice, including the eyes, but the glass-like ice showed the slight movement of the prisoner's eyes as he looked from his torturer to the High Seeker. His pupils were so wide that they nearly swallowed the color of his eyes.

Layle reached over to the cavern wall upon which the prisoner was attached, standing stiffly upright. Pulling off a shard of ice, he raised it

until it caught afire with light. The light-ray hit the prisoner in the eyes, but there was no change, either in his expression or in the eyes.

Layle let the shard fall with a tinkle to the ground. "How long has he been like this?"

"Can't you tell?" Master Aeden's voice was challenging, as it had been when he was training Layle.

"Yes. But my answer doesn't match the evidence before me."

"So what do you see?" his master asked softly.

Layle let his gaze travel once more over the frigid form before he said, "The prisoner is about forty-five years old. He has worked as a laborer, probably in the fields, judging from the types of cuts on his hands. He is in the early stages of freezing. He can still understand easily any questions he is asked, and if you were to allow him freedom from the ice, his movements would be little impaired. He is at the stage where freezing is a pain, not yet a comfort to be embraced. The warmth is being slowly sucked from him. He is . . . four degrees colder than usual, I think."

He heard a sigh from behind. "Ah, my dear," Master Aeden said. "I think your coming here is worth it to me just to hear those words. There have been times over the years when I wondered whether my memories of you were nothing more than the fond dreamings of a torturer nearing old age, who has created in his mind the image of an infallible apprentice."

"Then let me break that image through my fallibility," Layle said, his gaze transfixed upon the prisoner's eyes, shifting from one speaker to the next. "At a minimum, your prisoner could not have been here for less than six hours – it would have taken that long for the ice to take the form it has. Moreover, he is entirely encased in ice, with no breathing hole. He should be dead by now. What's keeping him alive?"

"If I told you, would you understand?"

Despite himself, Layle felt a small smile touch his lips. "No. Knowledge of machinery was never my strength."

"Yes, I'd gathered that from the number of times you broke my rack while it was under your use." Master Aeden's voice was dry. "If you hadn't been as skilled with prisoners as you were, I would have confined you to using the Adoration."

"Too slow." Layle reached forward and touched the prisoner's skin again. The heartbeat had not changed. "There are better methods of breaking prisoners."

He heard a sigh behind him. "Our eternal argument. I fancied you had come to recognize the value of a sure, steady method of dealing pain to prisoners."

Layle said only, "How long has the torture lasted?"

"Sixteen months. That's right, isn't it?" Master Aeden raised his voice, and the prisoner shifted his eyes toward the speaker. Otherwise, there was no movement of the eyes to indicate surprise.

Layle felt a coldness enter his stomach and a wave of heat enter him further down. It was a combination he was used to, so he paid it no mind. "Why?" he asked quietly. "The prisoner can't even confess his crime to you – you've sealed his mouth."

"Why should we want to hear his confession? We already know what he's done."

There was a small silence, disturbed only by the wind whistling through the cavern. Where Layle's thumb had lain upon the prisoner's throat, the moisture had returned to ice.

"I see," Layle said in a voice he could not strip of bitterness. "So this is like the rapes you taught me to perform as a boy. It doesn't matter that the prisoner has given his confession; you will continue his pain for a while longer, in order to demonstrate your power over him."

He was aware, even as he spoke, that he was acting in an unprofessional manner, criticizing a colleague in front of a prisoner. He could not stop himself. This was how it had been in the old days, when he and his master had halted periodically in their work to argue with raised voices over the

proper method by which to proceed, while the prisoner writhed between them, awaiting his fate.

Now there was only silence. Finally Layle turned his head slowly. Master Aeden was looking at him with an expression that would have been unreadable, had Layle not been who he was. As it was, he could sense clearly the mixture of anger and pain that his master was successfully hiding from the rest of the world. "You are mistaken," Master Aeden said softly. "This prisoner was searched and confessed before his arrival here. This is a punishment dungeon."

Layle turned his gaze swiftly back to the prisoner. The prisoner followed him with his eyes, the remainder of his body immobile.

Sixteen months?

Sweet blood, that was only the beginning. Layle felt his chest grow tight, all the pleasurable warmth below forgotten. He had known this was happening in Vovim. He should not be surprised. He should not feel the pain anew.

This prisoner before him was the fruit of Layle Smith's tireless efforts to extend prison reform into his native land. As the result of international pressure that Layle had orchestrated upon Vovim, the King of Vovim had agreed to lift the traditional death sentence for some of the lesser crimes.

And here was what the King had given the prisoners instead. Lifelong torture.

Layle felt a grip upon his shoulder, and he became aware at the same moment that someone was softly cursing. It was himself. He bit his lip closed and let Master Aeden steer him out of the cavern. He was shivering as though he were the one encased in ice, and he was not surprised when Master Aeden, without comment, dropped his cloak back upon Layle's shoulders. His master's arm followed, and Layle allowed himself to be guided down the curving corridor.

After a while, Layle asked, "Were you ordered to work here?"

"Yes. But it makes no difference; I am pleased to be here. Now, hear me out, my dear," he added, though Layle had not spoken. "I know that the

role of executioner never appealed to you – nor to me, for that matter. But if a crime is committed, someone must carry out the just punishment that the criminal deserves. You used to tell me that you hated the thought of torturing innocent prisoners. Well, you should be happy to work in a dungeon where every prisoner you torture is guilty and will merit the pain he receives."

"Just punishment." Layle gave half a breath of laughter. "Master, you know well enough how little justice exists in Vovim. Do you truly believe that all of the prisoners here are guilty? That even most of them are?"

"Yes, I do."

The response startled him. He pulled away from Master Aeden's arm and looked over at the older torturer. His master said nothing, though, but trailed his hand over the whorled pattern of the rocks they were passing. "Beautiful, isn't it? Nature's art. It's been a while since you've seen prison art, I imagine."

Layle was silent a moment, wondering, with professional calculation, whether this was the moment to press Master Aeden on the topic he was avoiding. Then he said, "Yes, I've missed that. I'm afraid that the Eternal Dungeon is of no great beauty, as outward appearances go."

"Visit Vovim for the arts, visit Yclau for machines – that's what they say." Master Aeden's smile deepened.

"We have art tradesmen," Layle said.

After a moment, he recognized the defensiveness of his reply. He glanced at Master Aeden and saw that his master was openly grinning. A smile tugged at Layle's lips, and he conceded, "They deal mainly in Vovimian artworks. Yes, I miss the arts in Yclau. When I was quite young, before my father died, my mother and I lived in a cottage that had an etching framed on the wall. It showed the artist's concept of the divine world."

Master Aeden snorted. "Why do I suspect that the picture was of the torture-god's dwelling?"

Layle's smile quirked as they made their way down the corridor. "You know me too well. It was a beautifully detailed picture of hell, showing the

great spiral downwards to the bottom of the pit. Every soul's punishment was lovingly depicted. At the very top of the picture, looking down upon everything, was a torturer – at least, I assumed he was a torturer, because he had a smile on his face. He was holding in his hand a tiny black object. I used to spend hours trying to decide whether the object was a hot poker or pincers."

Master Aeden snorted again. "And you implied just now that I tried to corrupt you. My dear, any five-year-old boy who spends his days dreaming of torture needs no lessons in corruption from me." He stopped at a doorway and waved Layle forward. "You look a bit chilly – it's warmer in here."

Layle stepped through the archway and was met at once by a blast of heat, as though from an overstoked furnace. He drew his breath in sharply; he was proof of the old saying that torturers cannot abide torture upon themselves. After a moment's pause to collect himself, he accompanied Master Aeden into the heart of the cavern.

It was not as bright as the ice-torture cavern had been, and so it took him a minute to make out the dozens of figures before him. They were bound to poles, but he could see only their shoulders and heads, for the remainder of their bodies were immersed in a dark pool at the center of the cavern. His nose quivered with a familiar scent. Even before he drew close enough to see the color of the pool, he knew that it was composed of blood.

A low humming like that of bees came from the mass of prisoners bound inside the pool. The moans were not loud or piercing; they were like the groanings of a man who has endured too hard a labor. Rimming the pool, watching the souls carefully, were men and women holding hayforks, occasionally poking any soul whose moans had diminished. They glanced up as the newcomers arrived, and a couple of them nodded their greetings to Master Aeden.

Nobody greeted Layle, but he guessed that they knew who he was, for several of them drew back as he came forward, as though shielding themselves from a chill wind. He was used to that. Ignoring them, he knelt down next to the pool and cautiously touched the blood. It was

uncomfortably warm, but not scalding. He looked again at the moaning souls, lingering in their suffering.

An elbow nudged him, and he looked over to see that Master Aeden was offering him a cup. "Here," he said. "This will warm your body."

Layle nearly had it in hand before he realized that the cup contained blood. He shook his head, and Master Aeden sighed. "You'll need to become used to the food and drink here, you know," the master torturer said.

"No."

Master Aeden's expression flickered; Layle guessed that the other man had surmised the all-encompassing nature of his reply. Rising up from where he knelt, Master Aeden said briskly, "It's crowded in here. Let's go where we can talk."

They walked through the moaning cavern, passing between shadows and dim light, until they reached a narrowing of the cave. Layle followed Master Aeden through the gap and found himself in a cavern without light, other than what trickled through the doorway. Dimly ahead of him, he could see a river of blood moving sluggishly toward the pool behind them. Layle's heart beat hard for a moment, but when he looked for the source of the river, he realized that it was the rocks themselves, pouring out blood in a small waterfall. He could see no hole to escape through.

The whisper of the fall was the only sound in this place; the moans in the nearby cavern were too faint to reach here. Master Aeden sat down at the riverbank, sipping slowly from the rejected cup and occasionally making a face at the taste. Layle sat beside him and stared at the river's surface, too dark to reflect any object.

"My dear, how did it happen?"

He did not pretend to misunderstand. "It wasn't due to the Code, master. I was a Seeker for nearly twenty years, abiding by the Seekers' Code, before the madness came upon me."

He lifted his eyes toward his master. Master Aeden's long beard had touches of grey upon it, and his eyes were flanked by creases that had not been there when Layle was apprenticed to him. Otherwise he looked much

the same as in the old days. Except for the line across his cheek. Layle had seen that line only once in his lifetime, upon their last meeting: when Master Aeden had stood outside the Hidden Dungeon, naked of all weapons and with the fresh scar of Layle's whip upon his face.

"Master," Layle said quietly, "if you've had me brought here because you're angered that I tried to kill you, would it ease your pain if I told you I have regretted that deed every day since then?"

Master Aeden lifted his eyebrows. "Why should I be angry at you? I'd tortured and raped your love-mate. Any man would have done what you did."

"You were acting upon the King's orders. And as for vengeance . . . Elsdon didn't want me to hurt you. He tried to stop me from killing you. I did what I did, not for his sake, but for my own. Because I hated myself for feeling desire at the sight of his mutilations. Because I hated you for making me what I am." He flicked a rock into the water; it rose to the surface and floated down the river in the direction of the pool. In a low voice, Layle added, "You were right in what you said, though. I was corrupt long before I first met you."

He felt a touch of the hand upon his chin; then his face was lifted and turned. Master Aeden looked upon him with eyes that made Layle's chest tight with the memory.

"My dear," said his master gently, "you always had one great fault as a torturer: you were too hard on yourself. You let your conscience torture you more than you tortured any prisoner. Though I didn't approve of your decision to flee to the Eternal Dungeon, I hoped that there, at least, you would find a way to make peace with your dark desire."

Layle turned his head away, staring into the shadow-black blood. "I did, after a fashion. When I first arrived at the Eternal Dungeon, I tried to rid myself of my dark desire. Even before I realized that I couldn't break that binding, I had found a way to keep my desire from harming others: I fed it with dreamings of the past and the imaginary, so that it wouldn't act in the real world."

Master Aeden sighed. "You gave your desire stale food, when you might have remained in Vovim and fed it with a banquet."

"Master, what a Seeker can do—" He realized that his voice had risen so loud that it was bouncing off the cavern walls. He lowered his voice. "I can't explain it; you would have to witness it to understand the joy. I am so indebted to the Code that any sacrifice I can make to it is small in comparison to what it has given me."

"Mm." Master Aeden examined his fingernails for a moment before nibbling upon one. Layle saw him swallow the nail-shaving. "I begin to understand. You were always more pious than me, my dear – I prefer to wait to hear what the gods want of me rather than offer sacrifice beyond which they might demand. But I suppose that sort of waiting is difficult in a land where no god ever speaks his wishes. Well, you made your sacrifice to your new religion – but something went wrong. Your dark desire wasn't satisfied with what you fed it?"

"For seventeen years it was." Layle brushed the blood-warm rocks with his fingers. "Then I met Elsdon Taylor."

"Ah." Master Aeden's response was little more than a sigh.

Layle turned to look at his master. "You spoke with Elsdon."

Master Aeden gave one of his deep smiles. "We had the opportunity to chat during his torture, yes. A fine young man – if you're seeking my blessing, you have it. But I can see why he would have disturbed your equilibrium. He certainly disturbed mine." He ended on a dry note.

Layle hesitated. This was not a matter he had spoken of to any person other than the Eternal Dungeon's healer; amidst all the dungeon gossip, Layle wished keenly to preserve the privacy of the bedroom he shared with Elsdon. But if anyone had served as a father during Layle's youth, it had been Master Aeden, and his master already knew half the story.

As though sensing Layle's need to be prompted, Master Aeden said, "You found a way to make love to him."

Layle nodded, returning his focus to the rocks. "He understood my difficulty and encouraged me to use my dreamings as a way to raise my

desire with him. When we were together, I would dream my dark dreamings and would give him orders that corresponded in some way to what I was doing to him in the dreamings – orders that wouldn't hurt him in the real world."

"Ah!" Master Aeden's delight at this news shone like a light in the cavern. He reached forward and squeezed Layle's hand. "Very clever, my dear. I wish I had thought to suggest this when you first struggled with your problem, back in your apprentice days. But I suppose it needed the right partner to be carried off properly. So your love-mate is a good play-actor?"

Layle shook his head. "He doesn't play-act. He followed my orders, but he didn't know what play we were acting. I never told him at the time what my dreamings were about."

"What?" Master Aeden's voice was sharp as he pulled back. "My dear, what nonsense is this? I thought better than that of your young man."

Layle tightened his fists and then swiftly loosened them, retreating from the instinct he always felt to torture anyone who attacked Elsdon. "Master, you don't understand. Tell me, when were you last at the theater?"

"Why, just yesterday, my dear. You know I never miss a performance if my leisure hours permit it. We have quite a fine theater company here – though I'm bound to say that the directing lacks finesse. That's probably because our director is being hung in chains. He's not always as alert as we'd like him to be."

Layle waited until the shudder had passed through his body and the heat had receded from his loins before saying, "The Yclau have no theater."

A long silence followed. He supposed that Master Aeden was still absorbing this news, as he might have absorbed the news that the sun no longer existed. Then Master Aeden said, in the tentative voice of a man reaching a conclusion, "You're mocking."

"I'm not. Oh, they have something they call theater. The director decides beforehand what speeches and activities will take place in the play, and then the players memorize their lines and movements, and when that's done, they perform their play."

"Good Mercy above!" Master Aeden's voice resonated with shock. "I always knew they were barbarians. No one there does proper acting?"

Layle shook his head. "Just the children. They play-act the Vovimian way, deciding first what their roles will be, and then playing out their parts as they are inspired. They have a game there, Torturer and Prisoner – you'd like it."

Master Aeden chuckled. "I'll pass it by, thank you. Unlike you, torturing is my job, not my leisure. . . . Your love-mate grew up in Yclau. Surely, if he play-acted as a child . . ."

Layle shook his head once more. "Master, it's not that simple. I'm sure Elsdon never played Torturer and Prisoner – he couldn't have. When he was a boy, he was bound and tortured by his father."

For a moment, silence spread between them, like widening waters. Then Layle felt Master Aeden's hand cover his once more. "I see," his master said quietly. "I wondered why my simple act of binding him broke him so easily. . . . So he cannot play-act that he is being tortured." Layle shook his head, and Master Aeden sighed.

"It seemed not to matter at first," Layle said. "We were happy together; we both thought we had found all we ever wanted."

"Was my torture what destroyed the peace between you?" Master Aeden's voice was even as he withdrew his hand.

"Elsdon has always thought so. Not that he dwells on your role in the matter – resentment isn't in his nature. But he thinks that I blamed myself overmuch for sending him to Vovim, and that this is what drove me into madness."

"And that wasn't the reason?" Master Aeden's voice remained quiet.

"Not the full reason. It played a part, but even before Elsdon left for Vovim . . . There had been trouble between us. Not in our souls, but in my body – I was finding it harder and harder to respond to him. And when he came back from Vovim . . . He knew that I would dream of his torture under you the first time we went to bed together again, yet he tried . . . We both tried. My failure was greater than his. I've never been sure why."

Master Aeden sighed again. His breath rippled the sluggish water, sending waves travelling in the direction of the pool. "My dear, if I were to direct a company of two, and if I told one player, 'Perform this role for me,' and I told the other player, 'You are not to play-act – just follow my orders blindly' . . . How good a play do you think would result?"

Layle pulled up his legs against his chest and rested his chin upon his knees. In a tight voice, he said, "You are saying we have not been in union with one another."

"My dear, whatever your bodies may have been doing together, your minds have been in different places. And where the minds are disunited, the bodies cannot stay in union for long. If this were only a passing affair, and you were to seek other love-mates—"

Layle shook his head quickly, and Master Aeden sighed again. "You've tried since the madness?"

"To make love to Elsdon? No, that would be too dangerous; my control over myself has dwindled in the past three years. But Elsdon and I have tried to stay linked together when I enter into my dreamings, as we did in the days when we made love – it's the dungeon healer's best suggestion for how I can keep from being sucked into the madness again. It hasn't worked. It's what holds me back from working with prisoners again: the knowledge that I no longer have a way to feed my dark desire. If I try to stay linked with Elsdon, I fail; if I enter into a dreaming on my own, I risk being pulled back into madness. And if my dark desire is given no food and decides to feed upon the people around me . . ."

Master Aeden let out his breath slowly, its sound almost obscured by the waterfall of blood. "My dear, out of all the men and women in the world, why did you choose to fall in love with the one man who cannot give you the type of love you need?"

Layle felt a wry smile touch his lips. "I've asked Elsdon that question often enough. I don't know why he remains with me – I've tried to persuade him to leave me endless times. I tried to escape him through my madness, to free him so that he wouldn't be hurt by me any more. It didn't work; he came for me. He'll come for me again and spend his life searching for me."

After a while, he turned his head to look at Master Aeden. His master said nothing; he was staring over the blood to the dark wall beyond. Then he opened his mouth to speak, but any sound he might have made was swallowed up by a roar as the ground broke free of its bindings and shook.

Layle toppled over. He clutched the rocks, as though trying to hold the ground steady. All he could think through the deafening rumble was, *At least death comes here rather than to the Eternal Dungeon.*

It was the nightmare that haunted every Seeker who knew the history of the Eternal Dungeon. The dungeon's predecessor had been destroyed a century before, when the cave it was housed in collapsed, killing most of the torturers and guards and prisoners. The remaining torturers and guards had used the calamity as an excuse to overturn the old system of searching prisoners and to create a new system, marked by the publication of the *Code of Seeking*.

Then, with perhaps a little less forethought, they had housed themselves in another cave. Their new cave was said to be stronger than the first and unlikely to collapse, but Layle had not held as much confidence about this as his predecessors had. Every slight vibration in the Eternal Dungeon caused the hair on his skin to stand upright.

And now the death he had feared had come, but at least it came only to him, and not to Elsdon and the other Seekers. Amidst the continued thunder of the earthquake, Layle closed his eyes and waited.

And felt the rumbling subside. A moment later, a hand tugged at his arm.

"Time for us to be going, my dear," Master Aeden said cheerfully. "That's the beginning of your shift. We can linger a while in the torturers' common cavern, but after that, we need to get you to your work."

Layle pulled himself carefully to his feet. "That was a signal for a *shift*?"

"Alas, yes." Master Aeden's voice turned weary. "I do wish the High Master would find a subtler way to indicate his desires. But I suppose it's to be expected. Watch your step, my dear – there's always a loose rock or two lying about at the beginning of shifts."

Layle followed him back along the dark riverside, and then through the dim archway, and then stood motionless. The cavern with the pool had disappeared: Layle stood on the rim of a cylindrical cavern which rose so high that he could not see the ceiling above him. Beside him, Master Aeden was softly cursing.

"I wish he would stop moving the caverns about like that," the older torturer grumbled. "Now I'll have to spend the rest of the day figuring out where my prisoners are."

Layle said nothing. His gaze had dropped to what lay below him: the whorls of the cavern, plummeting endlessly like the hollow interior of an auger shell. The cylinder narrowed as it deepened; spiralling around its edges was a pathway. The upper portion of the path, where Layle stood, was open like a balcony, but not far beyond, the pathway grew darker and turned into a double row of small, windowless rooms – cells, Layle guessed. He could see tens of thousands of them, and he could see all that took place within them, for the ice ceilings that covered them were translucent. In each cell a prisoner lay, and in many of the cells were torturers as well, working with diligence.

"Master," Layle said slowly, "this is hell."

He looked up to see that Master Aeden was smiling at him. "Of course it is," said the man who had been his master. "You killed me, remember?"

CHAPTER THREE

The queue to the hot water fount was long; the journey back to the table was crowded. Layle kept being jostled on all sides, both by those who could not see that he was carrying a cup and by those who could. He tried looking coolly upon the people around him, and this was as effective with the torturers here as it had been with the inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon. A path opened for him.

One brawny fellow, though, met Layle's cool gaze with a cold stare of his own. He stood his ground and deliberately elbowed Layle as he passed. Some of the water from Layle's cup spilled upon the other torturer's sleeve. The man cursed and drew back his fist.

Layle felt a rush of heat enter him, such as he had not felt since the early days of his apprenticehood, when custom required that he defend his place to the other apprentices by physical means. The trial had not lasted long, alas, and after that short but pleasurable period, Master Aeden had kept Layle well leashed with his discipline, as the master torturer would have leashed a dangerous dog.

Layle's swift mind had already sped ahead to the moment when he cracked the aggressor's spine . . . and then just as swiftly sped back, reeled in by his conscience. Before he had the opportunity to form a second plan, though, someone grabbed his opponent's arm and whispered in his ear. Layle heard the words, "High Seeker," and then, "Hidden Dungeon," and then, as though reaching the culmination of this recital of his great deeds, "Fourteen murders. Started when he was twelve. Not to be trifled with."

The aggressor raised his eyebrows in appreciation of this litany and stepped back. Layle glanced round at the remainder of the crowd, who looked disappointed, as though they had been hoping for a demonstration of Layle's powers. Layle ignored them and made his way over to the table where Master Aeden awaited him. The master torturer gave him a quick smile, as he had on the occasions in Layle's youth when his apprentice had resisted temptation, but he remained silent as Layle lifted the half-empty cup to his lips.

It had almost reached its destination when his hand jerked. His other hand went up to touch his face, and then the back of his head.

"What's wrong?" asked Master Aeden, raising his voice to be heard amidst the shouting nearby.

"My hood. It's gone." He tried to keep the panic out of his voice, though his nakedness stung at him. He felt once more the eyes of the crowd, watching him, looking at his face.

"I was wondering when you'd notice. You don't think they would have let you keep that, do you? It will have been taken from you during your searching. . . . A pity. I would have liked to have seen you in the full uniform of a Seeker."

Layle said nothing as he sipped at the water, which was bitter with minerals. He had only the vaguest memory of the process by which he had entered this dungeon. There had been questions, he remembered now, and before that there had been travel . . . From Yclau? He remembered a raging battle, one that he had thought took place between the soldiers of Vovim and one of the kingdom's small neighbors – a battle that he initially believed had resulted in the shifting of borders, so that the foreign dungeon had fallen under Vovimian control.

Now he suspected that there had only been two figures in that battle. And he was in the dwelling place of one of them. He wondered whether the battle had been lengthy, or whether Mercy had given up on him quickly.

"Master Aeden?" The soft voice came from behind Layle. He turned his head to see that standing behind him was the young girl he had seen in the entry hall; her right arm was covered with drying blood. She reached over to the table and dropped an object there. "Thank you," she said. "I found mine."

"You're quite welcome, my dear," said Master Aeden, pulling the blood-stained pincers over to his side of the table. "And did they come in handy?"

"Oh, yes! I had her in torment all day!" The girl's face shone for a moment, and then dimmed somewhat as she added, "I hurt her too much. I nearly broke her."

"Ah," said Master Aeden sympathetically. "And have you received your punishment for that?"

She nodded and proudly displayed her bloody arm for the master torturer's inspection. He chuckled and patted her arm, saying, "Well, run along, my dear, and get some rest. It will be time for your next shift before you know it."

The girl skipped away. Master Aeden's smile dropped the moment she left the table, but he waited until she was out of view before saying, "Vicious little wench. I'd hate to be one of her prisoners. She started with puppies when she was three; then, when she got bored with them, she began torturing babies. When she finally strangled her own baby brother, she was arrested. Because of her age, she was handed over to the specialists." He began picking at the pincer's dried blood with his fingernail. "I don't think she was one of mine. If I'd executed someone that young, I'm sure I'd remember."

"Master," Layle said softly, "am I dead?"

Master Aeden looked up from the pincers and grimaced. "If you are, my dear, then I'm very sorry. It hadn't occurred to me that you'd be pulled prematurely from life. I sent word to the High Master of your talents when news reached here from new-come prisoners that you had entered into madness. I had the notion that, if you were here, you might be rescued from your madness and given work that you enjoyed."

Layle said, "If only I knew which it was this time – death or madness."

Master Aeden chuckled. "Ah, yes, I'd forgotten how the Yclau look upon such matters. So I'm a creation of your imagination, am I?"

Layle shook his head. "I haven't strayed that far from my roots."

"Mm." Master Aeden picked more blood off his pincer before saying, "So either you're dead, and I'm really your old master, or you're in a dreaming, and I'm a divine messenger, sent to you in the guise of someone familiar in order to tell you something important. Frankly, I like the idea of being a divine messenger. It gives me a feeling of importance."

"You wouldn't like to be a messenger of Mercy in the house of a rival god."

Master Aeden chuckled again as he sipped at his own drink, a brown and yellow mixture that Layle had dared not ask him about. "That would be problematic, I agree. But as I am, in fact, merely a lowly servant of the High Master, I needn't worry about getting caught in the middle of divine rivalries. Perhaps you're the messenger?" He raised his eyebrows. "I can see that you would relish such a role."

"Whether I'm dead, mad, or on a mission for Mercy, I need to find my way out of here," Layle responded, feeling his body tense. "Elsdon will come looking for me and no doubt place himself in danger again. Master, I need your help."

"Oh?" Master Aeden sipped steadily from his cup. "And why is it that I should help you?"

There was a long silence, which made no impact on the cacophony of voices from the men, women, and children around them, who were arguing in loud voices, or engaging in fist fights, or throwing objects at one another, or simply watching the spectacle with pleased grins.

In the only peaceful corner of the common cavern, Layle felt the first signs of a shattering. A minute passed before he could find strength to say, "I thought you'd forgiven me."

"I said I was no longer angry, my dear – anger is a wasteful emotion, as I told you long ago. But forgiveness is quite another matter. It is not easy to forgive someone you have trained and cared for and loved, and who offers his thanks for this service by arranging your death."

Layle sat motionless for a moment. Then he pushed his cup carefully to the side and pushed back his chair. He was on the point of rising when Master Aeden's hand caught his wrist.

"Sit," his master said sternly. Layle did, though only because his stomach was beginning to churn, so that it seemed safer to remain off his feet. Master Aeden did not remove his hand. His thumb began to stroke Layle's wrist as he said, "It was not easy to forgive you, but I tell you truly that

when I first saw you earlier today, calling me master and turning to me as you had when you were a boy, it brought back all that had been good between us and drove out the bitterness I have felt since my death. So I ask your forgiveness in turn, for bringing you where you did not want to be. I trust you will recognize that my motive was as much loneliness as anything else."

Layle glanced at the turmoil around the common cavern, and then turned back to his master, sitting peacefully with his hand still stroking Layle. "I always wondered about you," Layle said. "You could have been so much more than you were."

His master nodded. "I thought about that early in my life, when I was first commanded to become an apprentice torturer for the King. I thought to myself, 'I can be what I've been till now, one of the lowest members of the higher order. Or I can join the lower order of mankind and be among the best of them.'" His hand slipped from Layle as he said reflectively, "I don't think Mercy was pleased with me for my choice. I suspect that's why she allowed the High Master to gain custody of me."

"Then help me now," Layle said, leaning forward. "Help me to escape."

A smile played upon Master Aeden's lips as he reached again for his drink. "My dear, say that a little louder. I'm not sure everyone in this cavern heard you."

Layle looked around and caught the looks of several people who were listening avidly to this small spectacle. They turned their eyes away hastily as he gave them his cool gaze.

Picking up his drink, Layle waited until his mouth was shielded from all prying eyes before he murmured, "I'm sorry. I've been living in Yclau, where the Queen trusts her torturers enough not to spy on them."

Master Aeden set his cup aside and began work again at cleaning the pincers, scattering flecks of blood onto the slab of ice that served as a table. "I doubt that the High Master would go to the trouble of setting spies amidst us."

Layle closed his eyes momentarily, feeling the weariness of ignorance sweep through him. "I've definitely been too long away from Vovim. I'd forgotten."

He opened his eyes to see that Master Aeden was smiling at him. "That too, of course, but I tend not to worry overly much about such a possibility. There are quite a lot of torturers here, and the chances of our meeting that particular one . . . Well, the odds are small. No, I was thinking of other means of communication with the High Master. Look around us – what do you see?"

Layle glanced at the turbulence and replied, "Fights . . . More fights . . . Gossip."

"You always hated gossip," Master Aeden said approvingly. "I'm afraid that's the main pastime here. The High Master permits us our theater, but other than that, we possess few ways to fill our leisure hours. Mind you, gossip takes a while to reach the High Master – it has to go through several committees first. But some time later today, he will hear that you asked me to help you to escape, and if you should by that time be missing . . ." Master Aeden shrugged.

"Then come with me." Layle kept the cup pressed against his lips, and his voice low. "If you know a way out of here, we could both take it."

"You offered me that choice once before." Master Aeden's smile returned. "My answer is the same this time as it was two decades ago. I know of no way out, and even if I did, I wouldn't take it. My dear, look again around you. Do you see anyone here who looks to you to be innocent of grave crimes?"

Layle did not have to look; he shook his head. Despite popular belief, his inbuilt instinct for judging the guilt of his prisoners was not infallible, but it was highly skillful. It had warned him since his arrival in this dungeon that he was among dangerous people. Every gesture, every remark, every look in the eyes, told tales too dark for him to speak aloud.

He put down his cup. "I can see why this place would suit you. Your conscience need no longer bother you."

"Of course." Master Aeden raised his eyebrows. "I'm doing work for the High Master – I may not be as pious as you, but that means something to me. I am punishing the wicked for their ill deeds. We don't receive petty riff-raff here, Layle. Everyone who arrives here committed terrible crimes."

"Like myself," Layle said quietly.

"Or myself. Come, my dear, I know that this isn't the workplace you would have chosen – but now that you're here, can't you reconcile yourself to serving divinity?"

Layle shook his head. "Mercy, perhaps. But the High Master you serve . . . I cannot work in a dungeon without a Code."

"Ah." Master Aeden nodded. "I thought it came down to that. There lies your true god, and you will not forsake him for a foreign god. Well, my dear, there is nothing that can be done about that."

"Isn't there?" Layle was careful to shield his lips with his cup before speaking.

Master Aeden merely snorted, though. "Can you see the group in this cavern rebelling against the High Master who gives them such delightful work?"

"Rebellions usually come from those who believe themselves to be oppressed." Layle did not bother to shield his mouth as he made this commonplace remark. He had done nothing more than voice the perennial fear of every prison worker.

Master Aeden chuckled and rose to his feet. "Come," he said.

Curious stares accompanied Layle as he and Master Aeden left the common cavern, but no one followed them out onto the spiral balcony that turned and whirled until it became a pathway filled with ice-cells. Further down, under the translucent ceilings of corridors, torturers walked to and fro between the ice-cells, but here in the balcony above the place of torture, the walkway was empty except for the master torturer and his former apprentice.

Master Aeden leaned his forearms upon the bar of white ice that served as a balcony railing. The chill wind blew back the hair from his face, revealing the face of kind cruelty that Layle remembered from his youth. He supposed that people must see something similar when they looked at himself, though in his better moments he liked to think that what he dispensed was hard kindness. He followed his master's gaze to the ice-cell directly below them, which could be easily seen as the pit narrowed and the circling pathway tightened its coil.

It was a larger cell than the others, filled with dozens of men and women and children. None of them were bound or appeared to be undergoing torture. The only sign that they were prisoners were the armed guards watching them.

The prisoners did not watch the guards; they were busy trying to maim one another.

Layle had to turn his gaze away momentarily before he was able to regain control. Then, placing his will under the mastery that had become ingrained in him, he turned his eyes back and watched with professional detachment as an old man sought desperately to fend off the fists of a young man who had attacked him. Nearby, two girls of maiden age were pulling at each other's hair and kicking each other's shins. Their screams of rage rose to where Layle stood.

"Watch that one," Master Aeden said, pointing to a man wearing bright red. "I've had my eye on him for days – he has won every duel he was waged."

A man wearing green, who had been lounging in the corner as he scrutinized the proceedings with narrowed eyes, came forward and said something to the man in red. He smiled as he spoke. The man in red immediately slammed his fist forward, but the man in green laughed and caught the other man's arm. There was a moment of struggle as the man in red sought to break free. Then, clear through the air, came the sound of a bone breaking.

The man in red fell to his knees, whimpering, as the fighting around him paused momentarily, everyone turning to see this change in hierarchy. The man in green smiled down at his defeated opponent.

Then the guards were there, pushing everyone aside. They took hold of the man in red, hauling him to his feet. His arms were bound behind his back, and the guards pulled him from the room as he sobbed.

The other man was removed too, but in a more subtle manner. One of the guards spoke to the man in green at length. He nodded and then strode toward the door and walked out of the ice-cell, unchallenged by any of the guards at the door. As he left, the other prisoners drew back from him silently.

"The victor becomes a torturer," Master Aeden said softly. "The loser remains a prisoner. The loser will be tortured forever. The victor will be his torturer."

Layle turned his head to look at his master. Master Aeden's smile had disappeared as though it had never known the dwelling place of his face.

"How long were you in that holding cell?" Layle asked.

"Long enough that I don't like to think about it." Master Aeden's voice remained soft. Then he shook himself, as though releasing himself from the bonds of memory. "There are your revolutionaries, my dear. Every one of them holds the ambition to become a torturer. If you led them in a rebellion against their torturers, their only goal would be to take over the jobs of their tormenters."

Layle said nothing. He was watching the progress of the red-clothed man as he began to struggle to break free from the guards. The man bit into the arm of one of the guards; as he raised his face, mouth red with blood, Layle caught a glimpse of his furious, deadly eyes.

"You've been too long away from hardened prisoners, my dear," Master Aeden said, patting his hand.

"Not so long as that. Most of the prisoners we receive at the Eternal Dungeon are like that. When they arrive."

Master Aeden's hand stiffened upon his. "And when they leave?"

Layle looked over at his master. "I sent you a book several years ago. Did it reach you?"

Master Aeden's smile returned as though it had never left. He reached behind his back, tucked up his shirt, and pulled an object out from its hiding place. Carefully, he laid on the balcony railing a black-bound volume with gold letters stamped upon its face.

Layle gazed down at it, not speaking. His throat had closed tight. Master Aeden said quietly, "It was kind of you to translate it into Vovimian, my dear. Yes, I've read it – many times. I've often thought that you have the skills of an artist, to portray an idealistic world that will never exist."

Layle said finally, "You were able to smuggle this into hell?"

"I had it on my person when I died. I never left it in my cell at the Hidden Dungeon – that wouldn't have been wise."

Layle nodded. This book was contraband material in Vovim, and the torturers' living cells were searched every few months. Master Aeden fingered the soft leather of the binding before adding, "It was discovered upon me when I was searched, of course, and was taken from me. A few weeks after my arrival, it was returned to me, with an accompanying message from the High Master that he had found it to be amusing reading. He suggested that I turn it into a comedy for one of our theater productions."

Layle stared down at the holding cell, watching the prisoners there as he had watched the prisoners entering the Eternal Dungeon. That girl, pulling the hair of her opponent – yes, even without having seen her records, he guessed how she could be dealt with. . . .

"My dear," Master Aeden said mildly, "when you are quiet for so long, I begin to worry. What are you plotting?"

"A play," said Layle, "such as this place has never seen."

Time held still for a breath's space. Then: "Ah." Master Aeden placed the pincers atop the book to prevent the volume from being swept off the balcony by the wind. "My dear, I hate to pull down your stagework before you have begun, but there are certain rules here, and those rules are enforced. You will not be permitted to break your prisoners, either through physical pain or through mental pain."

"I have no intention of breaking my prisoner. Nonetheless, when I am through, he will be broken." He turned his eyes toward Master Aeden. "You told me that the conditions of my work required me to remain here until I was finished with my prisoner. Is that right?"

He saw a flicker in Master Aeden's expression. He was not surprised; his master had read the black-bound volume.

"And what would you like me to do?" his master asked quietly.

Layle let out his breath, which he had been holding. "Answer questions. That's all. If the other torturers have questions, will you tell them the answers?"

"My dear, if the other torturers have questions about your work, they'll be flocking to me for answers. I'd be glad to enlighten them. *If* you can prove to all of us that this book has any truth to it." His hand rested lightly upon the *Code of Seeking*.

"You ought to know that it does," Layle said softly. "I was a murderer when you met me."

The wind whistled hollowly through the pit; shards of flying frost bit at Layle's skin. Master Aeden said nothing, but his grip tightened on the book. A rumble rose, like far-off thunder.

Layle had time only to see that Master Aeden was still holding the volume. Then the ground gave way under him, and he was sliding off the icy path into the void of the pit.

A yank upon his belt jerked the breath out of him. He felt himself hauled back onto the pathway; then he lay panting as the quivering ground settled down. Below him, the pincers that had been lying upon the book spun endlessly downward into the pit. Above him, Master Aeden was cursing.

"He must be in a foul mood today. He doesn't usually do that between shifts." He helped Layle to his feet and said, "I'm sorry, my dear. I wouldn't have taken you onto the balcony if I'd known that would happen. I think that's a sign we should get you to your workplace, so that you can start with your prisoner." He released Layle and softly brushed hoarfrost from the black-bound volume, still secure in his hand.

Layle turned his head, alerted by voices. Nearby, at the doorway to the common cavern, torturers were pouring out, evidently taking the earthquake as a signal that the High Master was displeased with them for their idleness. A few of them scurried down the pathway toward the ice-cells, but most of them lingered on the balcony, watching Layle out of the corner of their eyes.

"My audience has arrived," Layle murmured.

"And the play begins," Master Aeden replied, yet more softly. "Layle, you will have to torture the prisoner. You won't be excused from that duty."

Layle recognized the urgent warning in his master's voice and nodded. "Prisoners such as arrive here won't proceed far before they need torture as discipline. Don't worry, I won't disappoint the High Master in that respect." He moved his gaze away from the curious spectators and asked, "May I see my prisoner before the prisoner sees me?"

"Certainly." There was an odd note in Master Aeden's voice: a challenging tone, such as he had used on the occasions when he assigned a particularly difficult prisoner to Layle. "He's right over there, my dear. He has been told that you're coming."

Layle followed the line of Master Aeden's finger. The prisoner was not hard to sight; he was in the highest of the ice-cells, huddled in a corner with his arms wrapped around his legs. His head was bowed, but as Layle watched, the prisoner raised his head and dropped it back against the wall. Tears shone like frost upon his face.

"No." The word was so hoarse that Layle did not recognize for a moment his own voice. "No."

Master Aeden shrugged. "Well, my dear, I did warn you that you were considered to be the only appropriate person to handle him."

Layle said nothing. He felt himself shiver under the chill wind, while in the ice-cell below, Elsdon Taylor awaited the arrival of his torturer.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Now, don't you worry, my dear," said his master as they made their way carefully down the ice-stairs leading to the cells. "I know that your tastes have altered somewhat since you were my apprentice. No one here will expect you to place your prisoner in the sort of agony he would have endured in our old workplace – it wouldn't be permitted in any case. Just a little light pain over an eternal period, enough to provide justice for the crimes the prisoner committed."

"Master," Layle said in a tight voice, "this is madness. I can't torture my own love-mate."

Master Aeden looked upon him with bemusement as he trotted steadily down the slick steps. "I was under the impression that you'd done so already."

"Only when he came as a prisoner to the Eternal Dungeon. He'd committed a crime and had to be brought to the point of breaking so that he could start his new life. I wouldn't even have used torture to help with the breaking if I'd realized his background with his father. This time . . . Elsdon has done nothing to warrant being brought to this place, and none of the prisoners here, least of all Elsdon, should be placed in eternal punishment."

Master Aeden gave a soft laugh. "Religious disputes bore me, I'm afraid. —The High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon is here to see his new prisoner." These words were spoken to a group of guards armed with naked swords, who were guarding the narrow archway at the bottom of the steps.

The evident leader of the guards – a tough-looking youth with scars across his face and bare arms – nodded and said something in the old tongue of Vovim to the other guards. They immediately obeyed him, drawing back to allow the torturers through. Eyeing the guards as he walked past, Layle decided that they had heard some of the many scare-tales that circulated about him. Hardened a lot though the guards were, they kept well back and viewed him with cautious gazes.

"Master," Layle said as soon as he was out of the hearing of the guards, "how could Elsdon have come here anyway? He's full-blooded Yclau."

His master shrugged. "His tie to you brought him here? I don't know, my dear; all I know is that he turned up with a new shipment of prisoners around the time we heard that you'd be coming here. As soon as I learned he was here, I made sure you were assigned to him. —Here we are, Cell 43,516. Do you have the key?"

Layle took the key from his pocket and handed it to his master in an automatic manner. They were in a dim corridor now, much like the one he had travelled through upon his arrival at hell, except that this one's ceiling consisted of the translucent ice he had seen from the balcony. He caught hold of Master Aeden's hand as his master was leaning toward the door. "I cannot do this," Layle said firmly. "I cannot bring unnecessary pain to Elsdon."

Master Aeden sighed as he straightened up. "Then you wish me to have another prisoner assigned to you? That will mean another torturer for Elsdon, you know."

Somewhere further down the corridor, water dripped upon the ice floor, creating a bell-like tone that broke the faint groans in the cells nearby. Frost crackled under the feet of the guards shifting in their place at the entrance to the ice-cells.

Layle said, "Give me the key."

Master Aeden offered one of his sad smiles as he handed Layle the key with one hand, while patting him on the shoulder with the other. "You'll have to do without a guard, I'm afraid – you're not senior enough to qualify for one. However, you may ask the guards at the entrance here for any equipment you need." He took a step back.

"You're headed to sleep?" Layle asked with his inherent courtesy, which had never disappeared, even during the apprentice years when he routinely strangled his prisoners.

"Oh, sleep isn't permitted here. Ordinarily, I'd go over to the common cavern to chat with the other torturers about how their work is going, but . . . Well, I gather that everyone who's not on duty is on the balcony today. I think I'll join them. I'm interested in seeing your techniques." He gave a

broader smile and left Layle in the frigid corridor, with dim light streaming down through the ice above.

Layle looked up. He was so close to the balcony that he could see clearly the torturers standing above. All of them had their heads turned toward him. He suddenly felt himself seized by a sensation he had not felt since his boyhood.

"Play-acting fright," he muttered. "That's the last thing I need." He leaned forward and placed the key in the lock.

The door opened easily, despite the frost crusted upon its hinges. He entered the cell quietly, shutting the door behind him. Elsdon was still huddled in the corner of the cell, his body pressed against the ice that varnished the rock walls. Layle had difficulty seeing him, for though light made its way through the icy ceiling, the rocks here were so heavily laden with ice that the phosphorescence from them was blocked.

Elsdon's sobs stopped abruptly; he stiffened, raising his head. For a moment he simply stared toward the doorway. Then he stood up slowly and waited, his back hard against the icy wall, his face set in expectation of pain.

Layle felt his own body respond in kind, as though he had been abruptly pushed up five levels on the rack. "Elsdon," he whispered.

"Layle!" The junior Seeker's face transformed immediately from fear to joy. He flung himself across the small space of the cell, into Layle's arms. "Oh, you're here, you're here . . ."

He was sobbing again, his face pressed against Layle's shoulder. Layle put his arms lightly around his love-mate. "Shh. It's all right, Elsdon, there's nothing to be afraid of. I won't hurt you."

Elsdon gulped in air and sobs, saying, "Layle, I thought you weren't coming! I had to wait so long; I was sure I'd lost you forever—"

"I'm sorry I made you wait," he said softly, feeling the pain in his body heal with every word Elsdon spoke. He pulled back from Elsdon and wiped dry with his thumb his fellow Seeker's cheeks. "Elsdon, what are you doing in this place? How could you end up at hell?"

Elsdon stared at him blankly. He was beginning to emerge from youth into full manhood, the delicate lines of his younger years transforming into something no less beautiful, but less soft. At the moment, though, he looked very young, his eyes wide with lack of understanding.

"Elsdon." Layle took firm hold of his shoulders. "They did tell you where we are, didn't they?"

Elsdon took several gulps of air, as though finding it hard to breathe, and stared down toward his toes. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "That is, I wasn't sure— I'm finding it hard to imagine—"

"I know," Layle said quietly. "It was a shock for me as well. Remember that etching I once told you about, of the ice-cells of hell as imagined by one of the old artists? To find myself inside one of those cells . . ."

Elsdon peered cautiously up, saying in the same hesitant voice as before, "If . . . if you could tell me what this place looks like . . ."

Layle felt himself go rigid. "You don't know? Elsdon . . ." His fingers went up toward the gaze staring blankly at him, and he whispered, "Elsdon, have they blinded you?"

Elsdon stared at Layle a moment more; then, abruptly, he began to laugh in a hysterical manner. Layle cradled the other Seeker into his arms again, struggling to hold back his own tears now. "Shh, be still, my dear. It's all right. Whatever pain they've put you through, it's over now."

He could feel Elsdon trembling in his effort to control himself. "No . . . No, Layle, I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to . . . Oh, bloody blades, do you have a handkerchief?"

Layle quickly fished the cloth out of his pocket, grateful that he had been sent to this place wearing his old uniform. A handkerchief was part of the standard uniform for a Seeker, for sooner or later, most prisoners in the Eternal Dungeon reached the point of crying.

Elsdon wiped his eyes and nose, his hysteria lessening as he did so. "I don't know why I did that," he said finally, looking up. "It was stupid of me; I thought I was better prepared. . . . Layle, I swear, they haven't hurt

me in the least. They wouldn't dare – I told them I was your love-mate, and they've all heard of you."

"But you can't see the cell?"

"Well, it's dark in here," Elsdon said in a matter-of-fact manner. "My night-vision has never been as good as yours."

Layle felt his breath travel in swiftly. "So when I walked in here, you didn't realize it was me? It wasn't me you were afraid of?"

Elsdon stared at him once more. "Afraid of *you*? Layle, have you gone mad again? How could I be afraid of you?"

Layle closed his eyes and bowed his head, feeling, as he had so many times before, the heavy burden of Elsdon's perfect trust in him. In the darkness beyond his vision, Elsdon was saying, "No, I didn't know it was you. I thought it was— Layle!"

Elsdon's sudden, hard grip caused Layle to open his eyes. "What is it?" he asked.

"Layle, we have to leave here! They told me that they would be sending a torturer here – we must find a way to escape before the torturer arrives and begins punishing us!"

Layle shivered, his first reminder of the frosty chill of this cell. He could not speak for a moment. Elsdon, who could read him too well, put his hand up to Layle's cheek and said quietly, "What is it, love? Do you know something?"

"Elsdon—" His voice broke, and he had to start again. "Elsdon, I was brought to this place for a consultation."

For a moment more, Elsdon's hand touched his cheek. Then the hand dropped, and his love-mate's gaze dropped as well. "I see," said Elsdon in a level voice.

"Elsdon, I'm sorry," he whispered.

Elsdon's hands reached forward and grasped Layle's; he raised his eyes. He no longer seemed young. His expression was that of a Seeker, preparing

himself calmly for a difficult searching. "I'm glad, Layle. If it has to be someone, I want it to be you. At least I can be happy that you'll receive pleasure from this."

Layle felt his hands tighten upon Elsdon's hands, and he quickly released them. His love-mate was doing an admirable job of refraining from hysterics; he must try to match Elsdon in self-control. "My dear, no," he said quietly. "That's not why I'm here. I would never cause you unnecessary pain—"

"But it's necessary in this case," Elsdon replied, still calm. "If you don't torture me, someone else will. Layle, it will be much easier for me if you're the one to do it."

Layle was silent. The groans in the other cell had faded from his consciousness. All he could hear was the slow drip of water in this cell, like a water-clock. Finally he said, "Come sit down, my dear, and tell me what's been happening to you."

o—o—o

Elsdon's tale was not long. He had been questioned upon his arrival, not by the record-keeper, but by a group of torturers trying to determine which of them should be assigned him. When he told his name, one of the torturers laughed and said, "You have the same name as the love-mate of the High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon."

"I *am* the High Seeker's love-mate," said Elsdon, with such firmness that the torturer's laughter stopped abruptly. His questioner looked round at the others.

"I'm not touching him," said one of the torturers.

"Nor I," said another. "Layle Smith took revenge on the last man who tortured his love-mate."

"Put him in the holding cell," suggested a third.

Elsdon, taking one look at conditions in the holding cell, did not hesitate to invoke Layle's name as protection. He was not harmed by the other

prisoners, though he quickly learned that the Yclau were much hated in this place.

"You Yclau have a secret," said a sneering, whining man who was, as it turned out, destined to remain a prisoner rather than become a torturer.

"What do you mean?" asked Elsdon.

"You have a secret for keeping out of this place. The Yclau are never sent here – never. You've found a way of keeping the guilty from being punished eternally."

"Of course we have," said Elsdon. "Everyone is reborn, both the guilty and the innocent."

"Reborn?" cried a woman nearby, who had been trying to decide whether to bash her young daughter's head into the wall in order to impress the torturers. "I've never heard of that."

Elsdon soon had a crowd of prisoners around him, listening open-mouthed to his tale of Yclau beliefs about afterdeath. Even some of the guards wandered up to listen.

"So *that's* where the innocent go," said one of the prisoners. "I always wondered."

"But you say that the Yclau guilty are reborn as well," said another prisoner.

Elsdon nodded. "Eventually. If someone who has done evil has not yet regretted his misdeeds at the time of his death, he is held in death for a while – I suppose in a holding cell like this. Eventually, though, he breaks, and once he has broken, he's reborn into a better life. The Seekers try to assist the prisoners who are likely to be executed for their crimes by helping them to break before their death, so that there won't be any delay before the prisoners' rebirth."

"But that never happens here!" said a young boy who had been pummelling a weaker boy a moment before.

"Of course not," said an old woman. "It's obvious why it doesn't, isn't it?" She turned to glare at one of the torturers who had entered the cell to

remove some of the prisoners. The other prisoners and guards gave each other knowing looks but said nothing.

Having learned where he was, Elsdon asked one of the guards whether Layle was here as well. He could think of no explanation for his presence at this Vovimian hell except that he and Layle had died at the same moment – perhaps from an underground cave-in occurring in the Eternal Dungeon – and that his love for Layle had kept him tied to the High Seeker, even in afterdeath. If Layle was anywhere in this vast holding cell, Elsdon must find his love-mate.

The answer came back eventually that Layle was not here but that he was on his way. Soon afterwards, Elsdon was taken from the holding cell and brought to one of the ice-cells. Here, he was told, he must await his torturer.

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"A dreaming? That's what you think this is?"

They were sitting huddled in the corner now, Elsdon resting within the warmth of Layle's arms as Layle absentmindedly dropped kisses onto the back of Elsdon's neck. Layle lifted his head to say, "I can't be sure. But it would explain why you came with me. You and I had been making efforts to stay connected to each other when I entered into my dreamings."

"Only this dreaming is real," Elsdon said quietly. He was as calm as Layle had ever seen him: his breath steady, his body relaxed. Layle was quite sure this was not because Elsdon had forgotten their earlier conversation.

"I can't be sure of that either," Layle said. "But this is unlike any dreaming I've had before; never before have you spoken to me in the dreamings as you really are. In all my previous dreamings, you were a mixture of reality and my memory of other people and a goodly dose of my own imaginings."

"Oh, I'm real," said Elsdon, with a chuckle. "At least, this cramp in my foot is real. Layle, could we shift a bit?"

They did so as Layle thought to himself that the soft ping of the water dripping in the cell sounded very real too. It was an irritant to him,

reminding him of passing time. The observers on the balcony must be growing impatient; sooner or later, word would be sent to the High Master that the new torturer was neglecting his duty.

"I hope this is real," said Elsdon. "Because if it isn't, quite honestly I don't see how we're going to escape."

"I know," Layle said softly. "Last time, the only way I was able to escape when my dreamings trapped me was with your help. This time . . ."

"This time we'll assume this is really hell and that we can find a way out of here. So what do we do to escape?"

Layle felt himself tense. Elsdon immediately twisted in his arms, looking back as though he could see Layle. "What is it? Do you have a plan already?"

"I had half a plan when I arrived here," Layle said slowly, "and I think you've given me the second half. Elsdon, you're a Seeker. You must have guessed by now why no one is reborn here."

"Of course." Elsdon's voice was matter-of-fact. "The level of torture is too low. The prisoners are never permitted to reach a high enough level of pain to begin breaking beyond the hard wall of their ignorance, so that their minds are open to new ideas and they can come to accept their guilt and repent of their misdeeds."

"Torture isn't the only way to bring the breaking," Layle said. "Often it's not even the best way; conversation with one's Seeker is far better. But here . . . If any of the prisoners here have a chance of breaking, it's through pain so great that they begin to question their most fundamental beliefs."

"But they're never permitted to break."

"The rule here," Layle said carefully, "is that a torturer must not break a prisoner, either through physical pain or through mental pain."

Elsdon waited. Then, when Layle said no more, he burst out, "Sweet blood, Layle! Don't they realize what the third possibility is for breaking?"

"Apparently not," Layle replied. "The High Master certainly doesn't know – he wouldn't have left that possibility open if he'd been able to see it." He

hesitated, and then decided to word his next sentence carefully. If Elsdon knew that his old torturer was in this dungeon, it might frighten him needlessly. "I've spoken privately with a torturer here – one of the better ones, a man of conscience. He was able to understand what the Seekers try to do. But he's skeptical as to whether such a transformation can take place."

"I can't believe that such a transformation has never taken place in Vovim. Your old master, for example – he's someone I could imagine creating the sort of conditions that would allow a prisoner to break himself."

Elsdon's body was relaxed as he spoke. Layle reflected to himself, not for the first time, that Elsdon's strength went far beyond what anyone might imagine. He kissed Elsdon's hair – the other Seeker had been stripped of his hood also – before saying, "Oh, he can do it. He did it with me. He allowed me the opportunity to turn myself from an abusive torturer who murdered his victims into an abusive torturer who executed his victims upon the King's orders. It was a small change, but it helped ready me for my greater transformation into a Seeker. Vovimian torturers don't lack ability, Elsdon – they simply lack vision."

"But we know better," Elsdon said with the smallest hint of smugness.

Layle smiled at this proof that his love-mate could still speak with youthful imperfection. "We do – and that's our advantage here. My dear, the conditions of my work require that I remain here until I am finished with my prisoner."

The tension came finally, instantly; Layle had expected that. Elsdon was too quick-witted not to understand what he was suggesting. Layle waited, and after a long while, Elsdon said breathlessly, "I wish I was back home, where the worst I had to fear was that I'd lose my argument with you over whether you should help me with my new prisoner."

Layle hesitated a moment before deciding to give Elsdon the time he needed to consider whether to consent. "Elsdon, you're a Seeker. You're qualified to break prisoners on your own."

"Not this one. I told you, Layle – his medical records show that he's delusional. Not delusional enough to be placed in a home for mental

healing, but criminal delusional. He's convinced that his strange worldview is the only way of seeing things."

"And so," Layle said calmly, "you want a delusional Seeker to search him."

"You understand what it's like to live in a world of dreamings, Layle. You understand it better than any other Seeker. You could help my prisoner in a way that no other Seeker could."

"I could help him, or I could destroy him." Layle sighed as he held Elsdon closer. "My dear, you know I can't come near prisoners yet. Not as long as my dark desire remains unfed. Not as long as it remains unchained."

Elsdon sighed in turn, shifting in Layle's arms for a more comfortable position. "Love, you always talk about your desire as though it were your prisoner, or you were its prisoner. Yet if it's your prisoner, you treat it with a hatred you've never shown toward any prisoner in the Eternal Dungeon. And if you're its prisoner . . . You know what possibilities that offers you."

Layle nuzzled at Elsdon's hair for a minute before saying quietly, "That's all far away, my dear. Here we face the same question: You know what possibilities are offered to you."

"Yes." He heard Elsdon swallow. "Of course I'll do it, Layle. It's the only way in which to help you escape."

"To help *you* escape. I wouldn't leave you here in the dungeon. I've been promised my release if I finish with you – a promise the High Master has no intention of fulfilling, since he believes that the rules here will keep me from breaking you. But if you break yourself, under my guidance, then I will remind him of his promise. As for you . . . I will remind him that you are reborn. The reborn have no place at hell."

Elsdon gave a shaky laugh. "Let's just hope that his vision extends that far. Layle . . . I've been reborn once already, when I first came to the Eternal Dungeon. Can I be reborn a second time? And can I break in a dramatic enough fashion to convince the High Master to let us go?"

"I believe I know a way," Layle murmured. "Let your Seeker worry about that, Mr. Taylor."

Elsdon gave another laugh, this one more easy. "All right, I'll let you be my guide once more. But it's hard to think of you as a Seeker, Mr. Smith – you're acting in a most unSeekerly fashion at the moment."

Layle kissed his ear lightly. "There's a reason for that. We're being watched."

"Oh?" Elsdon sounded unconcerned. "And listened to as well?"

"No, our audience is on a balcony high above us. Look up, and you may see them."

Elsdon tilted his face up cautiously, then shook his head. "My night-vision is too poor – all I can see is a white blur. Is everyone from hell up there?"

"A significant number of torturers are. And I understand that the gossip here flies quickly."

Layle's voice was so sour that Elsdon laughed. "Poor High Seeker," he said. "You can never escape prying eyes. So this is how you will let the High Master know of your new method of breaking? By holding a demonstration in public? I'm not sure how anyone will be able to tell what you're doing, if they can't hear what you're saying to me."

"It won't be a demonstration of that sort." Layle looked at the audience above. Some of the onlookers were shifting their feet, but nobody appeared bored yet; it seemed they had all guessed that what they were witnessing was part of the drama. Quite a few of them looked interested, as well they might. This was not, Layle guessed, the normal manner in which torturers at hell proceeded.

"Mr. Taylor, did you ever play Torturer and Prisoner when you were young?"

Elsdon started in his arms, as though he had been touched by a jolt of lightning. "Layle, how *could* I?"

"Address me formally, my dear – it will be easier for both of us if you do." Layle kept his voice soft. "You didn't play Torturer and Prisoner, but you witnessed it being played?"

"Sometimes. When I could bear it. I . . . Sir, I don't want to think about it."

It was hard for Layle to continue speaking; he had to draw upon all of his professional knowledge of when to drive a pain-ridden prisoner into further pain. And this required in turn that he draw upon his dark desire, which was dangerous.

Even before he spoke, he could feel Elsdon shifting in his arms, aware of the change that had taken place in Layle's body. For a moment, Layle thought that his love-mate would flee from his arms. Then Elsdon settled back, his trust once more driving him to place his life and soul in the hands of a man whose dark past gave no reason for trust.

Layle paused a moment to push back his desire. It had served its purpose of making Elsdon squirm visibly in his arms, but now it was the last thing he wanted present. He was pleased to find himself successful. At least for the moment.

"I need you to think on that, Mr. Taylor," Layle whispered into Elsdon's ear. He could feel the effects of that whisper enter Elsdon as a shiver. "Remember what the torturer did. Did he know beforehand what he was going to say or do?"

Elsdon's voice was tight when he replied. "Not entirely. The boys would discuss beforehand what the general setting for the tale would be – who the prisoner was, and why he was brought to the Eternal Dungeon. But after that, the boy who was hooded – the torturer – would ask whatever questions he wanted, and the boy who was the prisoner would answer them. And if the torturer didn't like the prisoner's answers—" His voice ended in a shudder.

His whole body was shaking now. "That's enough!" Layle said sharply. "Withdraw. Come back to me."

He could feel the strain in his prisoner's muscles as Elsdon strove to obey the command to return out of the memories of his terrible childhood. Layle kissed Elsdon's neck to help him along, and then stole a glance upwards. The expressions on the onlookers' faces told him that the nature of this exchange had been witnessed, if not understood. The onlookers seemed puzzled, even downright bewildered. It was clear that none of them before had ever witnessed a session of torture that was accompanied by love.

He hoped that they did not draw the conclusion that his signs of love were a false mask he had donned in order to harm the prisoner. He had done that often enough in his youth. But when he glanced up again, he saw that a small crowd had begun to gather around Master Aeden, and that his master was steadily addressing the crowd.

So all depended now on whether Master Aeden would tell them the truth, which was that Layle truly loved the man he had just tortured. With that knowledge, the third scene of the play would end.

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It was a long while before Elsdon's shaking stopped. Layle communicated with him only through kisses during that time. He dared not rush Elsdon's recovery, not only because the roots of Elsdon's pain lay so deep, but also because this was the beginning of the fourth scene. All of the comfort he was offering Elsdon during this time would be witnessed, and with luck it would be questioned.

Finally Elsdon's body had calmed enough that the junior Seeker was able to say in a taut voice, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Elsdon," Layle murmured, "it's over. You may call me by my name."

"Layle. Why—? I'm sorry; I know you had a reason. I shouldn't ask."

"I had two reasons." Layle tilted Elsdon's head back onto his shoulder so that he could see his love-mate's face. It was flushed, but otherwise showed no sign of pain. He traced his finger down Elsdon's nose, causing the other man to smile. "Do you remember my telling you about the Vovimian theater?"

"Yes, of course. But why—? Oh, I see." Elsdon's voice grew thoughtful. "The games the boys play in Yclau. You told me once that was a form of play-acting. But love, if you wanted to talk to me about Vovimian acting, couldn't you have just—? I mean, was it necessary to—?"

"Yes." He dropped a kiss onto Elsdon's nose. "My dear, I would not have done that if it weren't necessary."

Elsdon gave a small smile then. "Stupid. I'm being stupid. Of course you wouldn't have. What is it about the Vovimian theater that I need to know?"

"That which you just spoke of, the method of acting. Elsdon, what are the stages of transformation?"

Elsdon furrowed his brow, but did not ask why this leap of topic had occurred. "For what type of prisoner?" he asked. "A prisoner who is innocent? A guilty prisoner who confesses at once? A guilty prisoner who refuses to confess but is cooperative? Or a guilty prisoner who refuses to confess or cooperate?"

"The most common one, the guilty prisoner who cooperates but does not confess. What are his stages of transformation?"

Elsdon gave an incredulous laugh. "You want me to recite them? As though I were a Seeker-in-Training?"

"Please." He had to stop himself from looking up to see whether Master Aeden was in the midst of reciting the stages in his translation of the drama. Layle guessed that he was; he needed to give his master time to complete his recital.

Elsdon raised an eyebrow, but said without hesitation, "There are five stages. The first stage is one that all prisoners go through, Fear. Every prisoner fears his Seeker when he first meets him, though the degree of fear depends on the prisoner's background and temperament. The Seeker must therefore find some way to make the prisoner understand that he will not be harmed if he cooperates, whether or not he offers his confession. The Seeker also uses this stage to begin to determine whether the prisoner is in fact innocent of his crime."

"That's not important here," Layle said. "Imagine you're in a dungeon where all of the prisoners are guilty. What is the next stage?"

"Cooperation. Only the cooperative prisoners enter this stage: it's marked by the prisoner indicating his willingness to cooperate to some degree with the demands of his Seeker. A few prisoners will offer their confession at this point, but the great majority will refuse to confess, either because they

fear the consequences of their confession or because, more likely, they do not consider themselves guilty in any true sense of the word."

"Is that what the goal is of the Seeker?" Layle asked. "To extract a confession?"

"No," Elsdon said swiftly. "That's what the prisoner thinks the goal is, and what most of the world thinks the Seekers want. But a confession from the prisoner is merely a natural byproduct of the Seeker's true goal, which is to make the prisoner aware of whatever in his life is preventing him from reaching his full potential, either in this life or in his next life. It could be darkness or a flaw – whatever it is, it's likely to be connected, either directly or indirectly, with the crime he has committed. The Seeker will seek to discover the root of the weakness in the prisoner and transform it, rather than simply obtain the confession and leave the root cause of the crime untouched."

Layle nodded. "So this prisoner of yours cooperates. Do you deal with him gently?"

Elsdon sighed. "If I could remake the world into my imagining, yes. But if the prisoner has reached the point of committing a crime, it's unlikely that he has the discipline to continue cooperating with his Seeker once the Seeker begins asking him questions that touch at the root of his evil. And so the discipline he lacks from within must be applied from outside. This is the stage of Discipline—"

He stopped. Layle could guess why, but he did not allow Elsdon time to explore the connection he had just made. "Yes?" he prompted. "How is the prisoner disciplined?"

"It depends on the prisoner," Elsdon said slowly. "Some prisoners are so callous and dangerous that they require physical torture: whipping or the rack. But wherever possible, the Seeker will make the discipline verbal. With the most cooperative prisoner, the only discipline need be the Seeker requiring the prisoner to answer his questions. This causes the prisoner anguish, but the pain comes, not from the Seeker's application of pain, but from the prisoner's desire to avoid confronting the evil in his life. Or in his past life," Elsdon added softly.

Layle planted several kisses on Elsdon's forehead before saying, "And the next stage?"

"The next stage is Compassion," Elsdon said quietly. "The Seeker has shown compassion from the beginning, but it is unlikely that the prisoner has recognized this. Now, though, the pain that the prisoner has undergone from the discipline will likely cause him to begin to break open and see things anew. As the Seeker comforts him during and after his discipline, the prisoner will become aware of how deeply the Seeker cares for his best interests, and— Sweet blood, I wish I could say that this leads to the fifth stage. In most cases, it doesn't. This is where we lose most of our cooperative prisoners; they become frightened and turn back to what they were before."

"But if they do not?" Layle said between kisses.

"If they do not, then comes the stage of Breaking. Of Self-Breaking, I should say, because the prisoner who accepts the Seeker's compassion and who trusts that the Seeker wishes to bring good to him will turn on himself and apply the methods of Seeking to himself. With the Seeker's guidance, he starts the final, painful steps, which only he can take in order to be broken in such a way as to be reborn into a new life."

Elsdon was silent after finishing his recital. Layle wondered whether he was remembering his rebirth; it had taken place only four years before.

Layle's own rebirth had occurred just over twenty years ago, but it was still vivid to him. He remembered that, amidst all his pain at recognizing his villainy, his only regret had been that Master Aeden had not been present to witness this, and to learn from it.

"Layle," said Elsdon in a hushed voice, "we're play-acting, aren't we?"

"This is real, my dear."

"I know that. But we're also performing a play: everything we've done since you entered this cell has been a way to dramatize the five stages of transformation. When you first entered, and I shrank back from you – that was the stage of Fear. Then I rushed into your arms. That was the stage of Cooperation. Then you forced me to remember something painful from my

childhood. That was the stage of Discipline. And now—" He turned his gaze up toward Layle, just at the moment that Layle bowed his head to kiss his love-mate's hair. "This is Compassion, Layle," Elsdon said. "You're acting out the fourth stage of transformation, for the sake of our audience."

"The fourth scene," Layle corrected with a smile. "We're in a play. And I've rarely worked with a fellow player who played his role so well."

Elsdon gave a short laugh. "It helped that I didn't know what I was doing."

"It would have made no difference if you did – you would not have had any memorized lines to recite. My dear, we're performing theater the Vovimian way: we have a general sense of what the setting is, but neither of us knows for certain what will take place next. We wait for the gods' inspiration, as the Vovimians would put it. And we hope that the results will be fruitful enough to make us a success with our audience."

Elsdon frowned. "Our audience. Layle, do you really think that the torturers who are watching us will understand what we're doing? I wouldn't, if I were them."

"They'll understand." Layle's voice was so firm that Elsdon raised his eyebrows. Layle added, "Vovimian theater-goers are quite sophisticated, my dear. Vovimian theater has little dialogue – most of the drama is conveyed through movement and gesture. Our audience is accustomed to attending plays where complex ideas are conveyed through symbols. They'll be expecting that, and if they don't know what the symbols mean, they'll talk with others until they find someone who seems to have a good understanding of the meaning of the play."

Elsdon let out his breath. "And the torturer you talked to before—"

"Knows the *Code of Seeking*. Even if he isn't yet convinced of what the finale of this play will be, he'll explain to the others what we're trying to dramatize through our gestures and movements."

"They could believe that this is all imaginary," Elsdon objected. "They could think that we're creating a play about something that has never really happened."

"They could. But they won't. The final stage will be acted in such a way that they will know this is real."

He felt Elsdon tense once more, but Layle had no time in which to add anything, for at that moment the door to the cell opened. Not for the first time, Layle inwardly cursed the lack of locks upon Vovimian cell doors. He was intensely aware, as he had not been before, that he was practicing the intimacies of his bedroom before a rapt audience.

The audience in question was the scar-faced youth, who stared at Layle with a dumbfounded expression. Layle quickly extracted himself from Elsdon and rose. "Well?" he said sharply. "What do you want?"

The suggestion of a grin began to emerge onto the youth's face. "Not wanting to disturb you," he said in the thick accent of a southern Vovimian, "but this here silence had me worried. Had the feeling that you hadn't started your work yet."

Layle waited a long moment, till his cool gaze had done its job and the youth began to look less smug. Then Layle said, in the old tongue of Vovim that he had learned from one of his fellow street-children when he was a boy, "Meddlesome servant with the brains of a pig. What would you know of my work techniques?"

The old tongue was a language well-suited for insults; he saw the impact of his words as the guard's eyes grew wide. Layle gave the guard no time to consider whether to attack back. Instead, he said in an acid voice, "I was brought here as a consultant for the High Master. So highly does our master value my services that he did not ask me to prove my worth in the holding cell. Can you say the same?"

The guard mumbled something about being duty-bound to report on lax torturers.

"Oh, yes?" said Layle with raised eyebrow. "And what do you plan to tell the High Master in your report? That the High Seeker, the highest-ranked torturer from the best-renowned dungeon in the living world, didn't happen to be torturing his prisoner by the same techniques that you had seen in the past? Obviously, I am wanting in education. Tell me, please, how I should

proceed in this matter. Or perhaps I should ask the High Master to have you train me?"

He had not thought it would be possible for the guard's eyes to grow wider, but he was proven wrong. The guard began to edge his way out of the cell, mumbling apologies in a fumbling manner that suggested this was a new activity for him. Layle waited until the moment when the guard was sure he had made his escape; then he said, "Wait."

The blade of his voice transfixed the guard in his place. Layle walked over to him, let his cool gaze travel over the guard in a manner suggesting that he was fitting him for the rack, and finally said, in an equally cool voice, "Your vigilance is to be commended. I will see that the High Master knows of your loyalty."

The guard narrowed his eyes, obviously uncertain as to whether this was a trap, but Layle added nothing more, and after a moment the guard relaxed. "Sorry I disturbed you, sir," he said.

"Not at all," Layle said, keeping his voice cool. "I can see why you would be confused; my techniques are new to this place. Tell me, Mr.— What is your name?"

Bewilderment covered the face of the guard. "Jack. Jack Ifor. But nobody's ever called me nothing but Jack."

"It is the custom where I come from to address others formally," Layle told him. "I've found that it improves work conditions. I imagine that work conditions here aren't as good as they could be, Mr. Ifor?"

He waited patiently as Jack struggled with this question, clearly at two minds as to whether to give an honest answer. Layle had no doubt what that answer would be. He had learned long ago that, if he wanted to know what conditions were like in the Eternal Dungeon, it was of no use to ask his fellow Seekers. The dungeon's guards were the ones who bore the brunt of any difficulties caused by poor work conditions.

"Well, sir," said Jack, rolling his tongue around the word "sir" as though it were unfamiliar to him. "It ain't the High Master's fault. I mean, he's good

to us. But . . . well . . . shifts are long. And we get piles of prisoners these days, almost more than we can handle."

Layle nodded. "We had similar problems in Yclau long ago, before we found a solution to the problem."

"Killing some of the prisoners?" Jock suggested hopefully.

"That's one solution," Layle replied evenly. "But that's not a solution here, is it? The prisoners can't be killed when they're already dead."

"Oh. Right. Well, we can't let any of the prisoners go, sir – they're too dangerous. They'd cause more harm in the world."

"I can well imagine," Layle said dryly, once more running his eye over the guard's scars. "What if I told you, Mr. Ifor, that the Eternal Dungeon has found a way to remake the prisoners so that they are no longer harmful? So that they can be released into the world safely, in order to make room for new prisoners and to make the guards' schedules less strenuous?"

Jock looked duly impressed. "Without breaking them, sir? We have a rule here against breaking prisoners."

"I will not violate any rules," Layle assured him. "However, I require absolute privacy in order to accomplish this difficult task."

Jack took the hint. "I'll see that you're not disturbed again, sir," he said, reaching toward the door. Then he added as an afterthought, "I'll break anyone's arms who tries to disturb you."

He closed the door before Layle had time to thank him for his thoughtfulness. Layle continued staring at the door for a moment, wondering whether his skills at binding could be refined in such a manner as to allow him to bind the door shut. Then he became aware of a strange sound behind him. He turned swiftly, and found that Elsdon was on his knees, choking with half-suppressed sounds.

He did not draw any hasty conclusions this time. He slowly walked forward and knelt beside his love-mate, touching him softly. Elsdon looked up. He was in the midst of trying to swallow a laugh.

"I'm sorry, love," he said. "But seeing you there, speaking with all the deep-voiced authority of the High Seeker . . ."

Layle relaxed into a smile. "Uncooperative prisoners can sometimes be frightened into cooperation. We were in danger there; your guard was on the point of reporting me to the High Master."

"The High Master." Elsdon's laughter subsided, and he raised his head as he stared in the direction of Layle. "Have you met the torture-god yet?"

Layle said slowly, "I'm not sure."

"Not sure? What do you mean?"

Layle tilted his head to look up at his audience. The latest episode in the drama had evidently gone over well; even though they could not hear what he had said to the guard, his onlookers had apparently read rightly the threat of his stance. They looked delighted, as though someone they had begun to suspect was a kitten had turned into a preying lion. Layle could see the bully he had encountered in the common cavern, leaning over the railing with pleasure spread across his face.

Layle shuddered and looked away. He told Elsdon, "The gods of Vovim are not disembodied beings; they take the form of humans. Mercy walks in the world above. When I was young, my mother told me that I must always be kind to others I met, because the other person might be host to Mercy. The torture-god, though, dwells in afterdeath, taking the form of one of his torturers."

"You said 'host.'" Elsdon leaned forward. "Does that mean that the gods enter the bodies of humans who are already alive?"

Layle nodded. "The torturer who hosts the High Master is not destroyed – that would be against the High Master's purposes. The torture-god merely seeks to join himself with whichever of his servants is best able to forward his goal."

"To torture prisoners," Elsdon said dryly.

"To bring justice," Layle corrected. Elsdon twisted his mouth in a skeptical fashion, and Layle added, "That is the goal of both Mercy and the torture-

god. They only battle each other over souls whose lives have been so entwined with both good and evil that it is unclear which divinity should have custody over the soul. In cases where the soul has clearly led an evil life, Mercy gives him over to the High Master to be punished, and in cases where the soul has clearly led a good life, the High Master gives him over to Mercy to be rewarded. Or so I was taught."

Elsdon thought upon this for a while before saying, "The host – is it always the same person?"

Layle smiled. "No. Every few centuries, the High Master finds a new host, one who can bring him closer to his ideal of perfect justice. It's considered a great honor, you know, to become host to the High Master."

Elsdon laughed then. "Was that your ambition? I can envision you dreaming of becoming the torture-god."

Layle gave him a soft smile. "When I was a boy. I have my own dungeon now; I don't need someone else's dungeon. . . . The host remains free and unbound in his will, for the High Master has chosen him precisely because the High Master is pleased with the workings of his will. The High Master does not enslave his host; rather, the host and the High Master work together in the interests of justice."

"A benevolent master," Elsdon murmured. He linked eyes with Layle, as though he could see him in the dark. "Layle . . . you're planning more than just our escape, aren't you? You're trying to show the High Master a new way of justice – you're trying to change hell."

"My old master always said I was overambitious," Layle admitted ruefully.

Elsdon laughed. "The Eternal Dungeon has long been indebted to your ambition. So the High Master could be any of the torturers here?"

"Anyone at all. The bully I met in the common cavern . . . The young girl who tortured puppies . . . Even the man in green who recently became a torturer. Perhaps the time had arrived when the High Master chose a new host; that could explain why the ground rumbled at that moment."

"Could the High Master be hosted by the torturer you spoke with?"

Layle shook his head slowly. "No. That man referred to himself as a lowly servant of the High Master. I've known him in the past; he has never told a direct lie to me. Not that torturer . . . but someone else here. Perhaps someone I've already met."

"Layle," Elsdon whispered, "if there's a chance the High Master is watching us now . . ."

"He could intervene when he realizes what we're planning to do. I know. I think it's time, my dear, that we finished this."

Elsdon nodded, the apple of his throat bobbing as he swallowed. Then he raised his chin. "Layle, the symbol of breaking will have to be a visible one; it has to be dramatic enough to convince those skeptics up there. You can't just discipline me with words again."

"I know," Layle said quietly. "They cannot hear us. With words alone, it would not be clear that you were the master of the breaking rather than me."

Elsdon nodded; he appeared calm now. "Which instrument shall we use?"

"It will have to be quick, my dear. We may not have much time."

Elsdon swallowed again, but his voice was steady as he said, "We knot your belt? Or did you bring rope?"

Layle still had his mouth open to answer when the door crashed open. He leapt to his feet and whirled, his hand where his dagger would have been if he had been wearing one. It was his automatic reaction to being disturbed unexpectedly, though it had been nearly a quarter of a century since he ended his life of crime.

All words withered on his tongue as he saw two of the lesser guards struggle into the cell, holding a bulky object. Jack, who followed them into the cell, gave Layle an apologetic look.

"Sorry, sir," he said. "High Master's orders. Master Aeden told him that this was your preferred instrument of torture, so the High Master made sure earlier today that it would be delivered to you when you arrived."

"I see." Layle let his eye travel over the instrument in question. It had been many years since he had last used it, but its design appeared no different from the design of those used in the Hidden Dungeon. "Please give the High Master my thanks. This is exactly what I need."

Jack's face relaxed into relief. He glanced over at the other guards, who were busy positioning the heavy object at the far end of the cell. Then he looked at Layle, his eyes flicking toward the door.

Layle took the hint. He stepped into the corridor, followed closely behind by Jack, who immediately glanced up toward the crowd on the balcony. Everyone there, though, seemed absorbed by the setting up of the equipment. Satisfied, Jack drew an object from his pocket and held it out toward Layle, being careful to shield it from the view of those above him. "From Master Aeden, sir," he whispered. "He remembered that you liked to use it with prisoners."

Layle took a quick glance at the contraband object, which turned out to be a bottle of lovemaking lotion. It was a murky color, and he did not like to think about what it was made of, but he slipped the bottle into his pocket, murmuring his thanks.

The lesser guards emerged from the cell. They seemed inclined to show curiosity as to why their leader had left the cell early, but Jack soon put their minds to other matters by berating them in a loud voice for a sloppy job in installing the instrument of torture. The guards disappeared down the corridor, their voices fading, until no sound was left but for the endless drip of water.

"Scene five," whispered Layle, and returned to his waiting prisoner.

CHAPTER FIVE

"The Adoration?" said Elsdon. "What a strange name for an instrument of torture."

They were standing before the bulky object at the end of the cell, which consisted of a knee-high platform, surmounted by a box with a slight incline. Except for the foundation, the entire instrument was covered in soft, pink velvet.

"It's named after a position of prayer," Layle explained, running his eye over the velvet to see whether the pressure of past bodies had rubbed away the fabric. The velvet showed no sign that it had ever been touched. "One of the forms of prostration to the divine is to rest upon one's shins and forearms. The box on this platform supports the prisoner's torso as he kneels in the position of Adoration."

"And then?" said Elsdon.

"The torturer questions him. That's all the instrument is for: to place the prisoner in a position he can remain in for periods of long questioning. . . . Can you see it?"

"Not very well."

Layle took Elsdon's hand and carefully placed it atop the box. Elsdon stroked it for a moment before saying, "Layle, this is soft."

"It's padded. So is the platform it rests upon."

"What sort of instrument of torture is padded? I can't imagine that this would produce much pain."

"Try kneeling upon it for an hour or two," Layle said dryly. "It's a slow instrument of torture, yes. The prisoner breaks eventually, but over a long period. It's used mainly with prisoners who would die quickly if stronger methods were used against them."

"And this was your favorite instrument of torture when you were young? Layle, that doesn't seem like the sort of instrument you would use. You prefer for prisoners to break quickly."

"That's why I used it. I would place the prisoners here, and they would think I was showing them mercy and that they could trust me. Then I'd show them that they were wrong."

Elsdon let his hand fall from the box; he did not reply. Layle put his arm lightly around Elsdon's waist. "My dear . . ."

"Stop fretting, Layle." There was an edge to Elsdon's voice. "I'm not worrying about you turning back into a fiend; I'm worrying about this instrument. I'm not sure it will be dramatic enough to impress our audience, and I'm not sure it will be painful enough to break me."

"It will in the hands of the right torturer."

Elsdon turned his eyes slowly toward Layle. In the dull light of the cell, his hair looked dark rather than golden-brown, and his eyes were shadowed as though he still wore his hood. "Love, stop," he said quietly. "You're not making this easy for either of us. I don't need you throwing scare-tales at me; I have enough real things ahead of me to be scared about. And as for you . . . When will you trust yourself as much as I trust you?"

"Elsdon, this is dangerous." Layle realized that he was gripping his hands into fists and tried to relax them. "I shouldn't be anywhere near a prisoner. It doesn't take a dreaming for me to become a threat – just ask the men I murdered. I no longer have the self-control I once possessed—"

"And you will not regain it by staying away from temptation. Love, you act as though we have a choice. We don't. If I don't break myself under your guidance, I'll be taken from you and handed over to another torturer. Keep your mind on that, and I know that you'll find the strength you need."

Elsdon placed his hand upon the cheek of Layle, who stood stiffly under his touch. Reaching up, Elsdon brushed hair from the High Seeker's eyes, saying, "Will you do something for me?"

"You know I will."

"Keep calling me by my first name. I know that you want the formality of last names to distance yourself from me during the torture, so that you won't be tempted to harm me, but I— Layle, this is going to be difficult

for me. I can't bear the thought of you being apart from me. Will you do this for me? Be intimate with me?"

"If you want me to, of course." Layle forced himself to break free of his paralysis, catching Elsdon's hand and bringing it to his lips. It was always like this: in the moments when Elsdon most needed his strength, Layle would grow weak, and Elsdon would be the one who comforted him. It was one of the things he hated most about himself, that he could not give Elsdon as much comfort as he deserved.

"My dear . . ." he said, and then stopped. He could think of nothing to say that would ease Elsdon's predicament.

Elsdon must have sensed this. He smiled and said gently, "Will you show me where I kneel, love? It will help to know beforehand."

Layle swallowed through the dryness in his throat. Taking Elsdon's hand, he guided the other Seeker over to the far end of the platform, where the shins were placed. He allowed Elsdon a moment to feel the soft velvet there; then, holding his breath, he steered Elsdon's hands over to the break in the velvet, where the slit lay.

He felt the jerk in Elsdon's hand as he guessed the meaning of the slit. Then Elsdon said calmly, "Straps?"

"Manacles. Steel, without padding. You have narrow ankles and wrists, though; there will be room for you to move a bit."

Elsdon nodded and moved his hand away. Layle caught hold of him again and guided him over to the other slit on the back end of the platform.

"They're far apart," Elsdon said, with a hint of tension in his voice.

"Yes. The legs are kept apart."

"I see."

Layle guessed that he did; Elsdon had been imprisoned in the Hidden Dungeon. Layle stole a kiss upon Elsdon's hair, saying, "No one is here except me, my dear. That part of the torture won't take place."

Elsdon said nothing, and Layle took a moment to glance up at the ceiling. Their audience was rapt. What Layle was doing – showing the prisoner the instrument he would endure – was part of the standard procedure of a Vovimian torturer. The kisses and caresses were not.

Elsdon had moved again, sliding his hand past the box to the front half of the platform. "Are the arms kept apart as well?"

"No, there's only one manacle at this end; it binds both wrists. . . . Here."

Elsdon touched the slit, and then crept his hand forward toward the edge of the platform. He paused, frowning. "What is this?"

The front half of the platform lay in shadow; Layle had to place his hand over Elsdon's to tell what he was feeling. "The switch to lock the manacles in place. The manacles are hidden within the platform, and when this lever is pushed, the manacles emerge and slide over the prisoner's wrists and ankles."

"But Layle, the lever's nearly within reach of the prisoner."

"Yes. Quite a few prisoners have noticed that."

There was a silence, and then Elsdon gave a humorless laugh. "I see. The prisoners work and work and work to squeeze their arms far enough forward in the manacles to reach the lever – and then, after all that pain, they discover that the release to the manacles is elsewhere. Somewhere where only the torturer can reach it?"

"Down near the bottom of the foundation. If you put your hand here—"

Layle stopped. The front half of the foundation was in shadow; he groped for a minute before saying, in a tight voice, "Elsdon . . . help me push the Adoration onto its side."

Elsdon did so without asking questions. Layle inspected the bottom, then inspected it a second time to see whether the bottom could be opened to reveal the inner workings of the instrument. Finally he sat back on his heels, his breath heavy.

"No release lever?" said Elsdon quietly.

"None." He looked at the closure lever, trying to convince himself that it also served as a release lever, but he knew the truth.

"Of course not." Elsdon's voice sounded hollow in the cold cell. "This is a dungeon for eternal torture."

Layle slid his hands over his face. Until now, he had been able to turn his mind from what lay ahead – from what must lie ahead if he was to obtain the escape he desired. But there before him was the symbol of what lay ahead for Elsdon.

He felt a hand on his arm. Elsdon said, "Love, don't worry. I'm sure you can find a way to convince the High Master to release me, after I've broken."

"You'll get your release," Layle said in a harsh voice. "It won't be an easy one, though."

Elsdon gave a soft chuckle. "Since when were matters ever easy with us? Layle, I think we should start. The High Master isn't going to wait forever."

Layle was able to focus his mind for the next minute on the strenuous work of helping Elsdon set the instrument back on its base. Then he took several steps back and stared down at the Adoration. It looked harmless.

It always had.

"What now?" asked Elsdon. "Do I just start?"

Layle shook his head. "We need to convince our audience that I'm not ordering you to do this against your will."

Elsdon thought on this a moment; then a small smile tickled his lips. "I'm going to like this part," he said.

Layle let him make the move forward. He remained passive under Elsdon's embrace and kiss, so that the onlookers would know that he was not sexually assaulting Elsdon. Only at the very end did he allow his arms to curl round Elsdon's waist, and his lips to press more firmly. Even then, though, he took care to keep his desire down. His heart was beating hard, but it was from fear. Fear that the desire would come.

Elsdon pulled back finally. His mouth was smiling; his eyes were not. "And now?"

Layle cleared his throat. "Now we start."

Elsdon took a step backwards toward the Adoration, followed by another step. Then he looked up, his eyes squinting as he gazed toward the audience he could not see. Layle wondered whether he too had play-acting fright.

"Layle," Elsdon said, "before Master Aeden tortured me, he stripped me. Is that the custom here?"

Layle felt his mouth and throat grow drier. "Elsdon, you needn't—"

Elsdon shook his head. "If we're going to do this, we need to do it as closely to the Vovimian way as possible. Otherwise, our audience will think that I'm resisting being tortured."

As he spoke, his hand went to his collar. He swiftly unknotted the shirt, unknotted the belt and trousers, and let his clothes slide into a neat heap at his ankles. As he crouched down to remove his boots, he glanced up at Layle and frowned. "Love?"

"Give me a moment," Layle said hoarsely. He saw Elsdon's expression out of the edge of his eye; Layle had turned his gaze away in the moment that Elsdon's light-skinned torso came into view, and now he was cursing himself with every Vovimian oath he knew. He could feel sweat gathering in his loins, where the warmth was greatest.

He closed his eyes and recited to himself the opening words of the *Code of Seeking*, then recited to himself the passage about the penalties placed upon Seekers who did not place the best interests of their prisoners first. He had written those words himself; they came to him like a familiar lullaby. Finally he felt safe enough to open his eyes. He did so, and felt his heart jump.

Elsdon lay like a sacrifice on the altar, his naked torso stomach-down upon the box, his forearms and shins pressed upon the platform. His head hung over the box; though his arms were close enough to cradle the head somewhat, Layle could see the strain in Elsdon's neck muscles as the other

Seeker turned his head to look at the High Seeker. The smile had disappeared from his mouth.

"I'll push the lever," he said, his voice more breathless than before. "That way, they'll know that the breaking is my decision."

"Wait." Layle walked slowly forward. The closer he came, the easier it was to see the rivulets of sweat beginning to trickle down Elsdon's body, dampening his hair. All of his hair; the bottom half of his torso hung somewhat over the box, leaving room that any trained torturer would take advantage of.

Layle moved his eyes swiftly back to Elsdon's face. When he reached the other Seeker, he pulled off Master Aeden's cloak and draped it over Elsdon before kneeling down beside the Adoration.

"Layle . . ."

"They've seen you naked," Layle said firmly. "Now they'll see me keep you from dying of a chill. That's part of my job as a Seeker."

"It's no colder here than at home," Elsdon protested, but his voice was weak. He was staring at where his hands lay, pressed close together.

Layle would have liked to have spoken words that would still the trembling that was lightly touching Elsdon's body now, but he dared not. A glance up at the balcony warned him that the audience was becoming restless. "The lever's a hand's span in front of you," he told the night-blind Seeker. "Push it to the right, then pull your hands back quickly, so that they won't be hurt by the manacle snapping into place."

Elsdon nodded. He took a deep breath, and another deep breath; despite his long training against such an action, Layle found himself reaching forward to place his hand upon Elsdon's shoulder. Elsdon's breath caught, and he looked over at Layle. "You won't forget your promise?" he asked in a subdued voice. "You'll stay intimate with me?"

"As intimate as you wish." Layle stroked Elsdon's skin lightly.

An expression flashed in Elsdon's eyes. It was a spark from an inward fire, dead before Layle had time to do more than register it. If he had been

anyone else, he would not have noticed it at all.

As it was, he felt his breath go still. *Bloody blades,* he thought to himself, *I am growing too old if one of my junior Seekers can use his talent against me.*

That was Elsdon's primary gift as a Seeker: his vulnerability. To prisoners first meeting him, the junior Seeker appeared to be shy and weak, a person who could be easily hurt and manipulated. Someone who could not possibly break them.

Elsdon never play-acted this role. It was a true part of his character, bred in him during his years of submitting in fear to his abusive father. But it was not the only part of him, and its presence at the beginning of a searching was not due to impotence on his side, but rather to his hidden power as a Seeker. His prisoners would discover this eventually, when it was too late.

Layle wondered what power he had just ceded to his love-mate; then he put the worry from his mind. If Elsdon wanted something from him, Layle would learn of it eventually. For now, the High Seeker's thoughts must be on his prisoner. He nodded, as though his concession had been conscious and willing, and he saw the dim beginnings of a smile on Elsdon's face. Then, before Layle had time to prepare himself, Elsdon turned his face toward his forearms. His hands darted forward and quickly back.

He screamed.

The three manacles slid into place at the same moment, shooting out of the slits and curving round till they met the platform with a crack. The space left by their curve was filled with Elsdon's wrists and ankles, now firmly bound against the platform. Elsdon's scream did not stop; his head was flung back, and tears were trailing from his eyes.

Layle barely noticed the throb of blood suffusing his own body. He was struggling against an image breaking through to him of Elsdon in their bedroom in the Eternal Dungeon, screaming under torture. . . . Then Layle managed to pull back from the dreaming. "Elsdon!" he said with urgent desperation. "My dear. Are you—?"

The door to the cell crashed open. Layle looked back and saw Jack standing there, with his sword in hand. His eyes were on Elsdon.

"Get *out*, you food for the torture-god!" Layle shouted at him.

Jack remained where he was, watching Elsdon sob out the last of his scream. "Sir, I'm sorry, sir, but I have orders to stop any torturer who—"

"Mr. Ifor," Layle said, his voice colder than the ice on the walls, "I will dismember you if you do not remove yourself from this cell. *Now!*"

Jack's gaze flicked away from the harshly sobbing prisoner to his torturer; the guard's expression hardened. But he seemed uneager to test Layle on his threat. After a moment he backed out of the cell, closing the door. His footsteps rushed down the corridor.

Layle heard a faint noise and glanced up at the balcony. He saw that the crowd had erupted into consternation. The onlookers were shouting at one another, and some of the torturers had evidently made up their minds how they should respond to the latest event: they were racing down the walkway. Layle wondered whether they were members of the communications committee, gone to alert the liaison.

He hoped that was all they were.

Layle leaned forward, so that his face was close to his love-mate's. "Elsdon. Can you hear me?"

"Layle, it hurts." Elsdon's voice was a breathless whimper.

"I know, my dear; I'm sorry. Elsdon, we need to be quick about this. Your scream warned everyone that you're taking yourself to the point of breaking."

"How long . . . ?" Elsdon panted.

"I don't know how long we have. Only a couple of minutes if the High Master was up on that balcony. Perhaps hours if the High Master is far below in the pit. I just don't know." He passed his hand over Elsdon's forehead. It was as warm as the pool-blood had been. "Elsdon, can you—?" He stopped, unsure whether to encourage Elsdon to relax or to drive himself harder.

"I'll break," Elsdon assured him with a cross between a sob and a laugh. "You don't have to worry about that. But till then— Sweet *blood*!" His voice vibrated, like the body that was shaking now. "Layle, please . . . Please, could you kiss me?"

"Elsdon . . ."

"Please!" Elsdon's voice grew high with hysteria.

Layle hesitated, glancing up at his audience. The torturers who remained on the balcony were beginning to settle down, evidently unwilling to miss the final scene of the play. A number of them were clustered around Master Aeden, who was reading aloud from the black book in his hand.

Layle felt some of the tension in him ease, and he returned his mind to his duty. Comfort – his duty as a Seeker was to continue to offer comfort to the prisoner as he entered into his breaking. The onlookers could not hear any words he spoke, so he must offer them a visible sign of his work.

He leaned forward and kissed Elsdon lightly on the lips, keeping his eyes closed so that he could imagine that he was back in the Eternal Dungeon, giving his love-mate a cool farewell at the beginning of a workday. He was pleased to find himself successful, and when he opened his eyes, he was smiling.

Elsdon was not. He looked at Layle for a long moment, his thoughts so far from himself that his shaking had stilled. "Layle," he said softly, "you're not letting yourself feel my pain."

"Elsdon, for love of the Code . . ."

Elsdon shook his head. "Love, you're not thinking. Sooner or later, when you return to searching prisoners, you will feel desire at the sight of their pain. I know you fear that moment. I want it to happen now, while you're with me. If you can feel desire and not act on it while I'm under torture, you'll know that there's no chance that you'll harm another prisoner."

Layle was silent a minute, hearing the faint drip of water in the corner of the cell and the fainter murmur of voices from the balcony as the onlookers awaited the next dramatic moment in the tale. He wondered

what they would think if they knew that the prisoner was searching his torturer.

"It's too dangerous," he said finally.

"Layle, we have no guarantee that you won't feel desire later, as my breaking grows closer. Isn't it better for you to let yourself feel desire now, while your guard is greatest, rather than to let it take you unawares?"

Layle said nothing, but after a long moment he let his eyes stray away from Elsdon's face to his body.

The prisoner, bound to the Adoration, racked with fear and pain from the binding alone. His body shivering, not from the cold, but from the unendurable strain of the torture. . . .

It was a dreaming he had spun long ago about Elsdon. The dreaming was before him.

He looked back at Elsdon. Elsdon was staring, not at him, but at his lap, as though he could see what lay there; his eyes rose to meet Layle's. Layle waited, the delectability of his desire almost forgotten in his anticipation of Elsdon's reaction.

Elsdon smiled. It was a smile of delight, suffusing his face with as much peace as his tormented body would allow. "Oh, Layle," he whispered. "I'm so glad!"

Layle was saved from response by a faint thunder in the distance. For a heart-jerking moment, he thought it was an earthquake. Then he looked up and saw that the onlookers were applauding.

Some were cheering; others, in the Vovimian manner, were jumping up and down so enthusiastically that it looked as though the balcony might give way. Master Aeden was still staring down at the *Code of Seeking*, but as Layle looked at him, he raised his head and gave a short nod to Layle, as he had in the days when his apprentice accomplished a particularly difficult task.

"Elsdon," Layle said in wonder, "it's working. Your smile made them realize there's truth to the *Code of Seeking* – that the prisoner can embrace

his breaking. Now all we need do is show them the result of the breaking —"

He stopped. He had looked down and seen that Elsdon was panting again, his eyes squeezed shut. The junior Seeker's fists were tight, making the tendons of the wrists jut out against the manacle.

Layle touched him lightly. Elsdon said, without opening his eyes, "Layle . . . I know we should do this as quickly as possible, but I don't think . . . It hurts so much."

"I know, my dear." Layle stroked his hair. "Tell me if there's anything I can do to help."

"I think . . . I want . . . The kiss helped."

"Would you like me to kiss you again?"

"Yes. No. It . . . it's not enough now. I need . . . Layle, I need you to make love to me."

Layle's breath disappeared. His desire leapt like a child at play. He could no longer hear the dripping water over the hard beat of his heart.

"No," he said faintly. "Elsdon, I can't—"

"You promised. Layle, you promised me you'd give me whatever intimacy I wanted."

Elsdon turned his head and opened his eyes. No weakness showed there; his eyes were as hard as any Seeker driving his prisoner to the point of self-breaking.

Layle remained motionless, as though encased in ice. Then he let his breath out. "So I did," he said softly.

Elsdon smiled again, his own pain forgotten in the contentment of a Seeker who has won his battle. Layle leaned forward, thinking grimly to himself that this was most certainly going to be a play such as hell had never seen.

He kissed Elsdon hard, and his dark desire danced with joy.

o—o—o

The prisoner would not break. Standard procedure for breaking uncooperative prisoners was to frighten them into breaking. Then, once the breaking had been administered externally and the prisoner was in a mental position of vulnerability, the torturer would attempt to show the prisoner the advantages of turning the external breaking into an internal self-breaking.

But this prisoner had proved too clever. He had guessed that nothing done to him in the Eternal Dungeon – none of the vaguely worded threats, none of the lightly administered torture – was aimed at his lasting harm. If he kept silent, his benevolent captors would eventually let him go, unscathed, and he would be able to continue his life of crime.

On the first hour past midnight, three months after his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon, an eighteen-year-old torturer walked into Rack Room C and proceeded to unleash all the terror and sickening horror of the Hidden Dungeon.

Young Layle allowed his dark desire to swell. He allowed the prisoner on the rack to witness this swelling. He said nothing for a long while, simply smiling down at the prisoner; even though he was hooded, the smile in his eyes was eloquent. Then, in the softest of voices, he proceeded to tell the man what he dreamt of doing to prisoners. And then he told the man, with a chill lightness of tone that had all the authority of truth behind it, that he had done this in the past to prisoners.

And the man broke. Cracked, like a twig in the hand. It was as easy for Layle as in the past, and it was as pleasurable.

He heard the prisoner's confession, then ordered the man's release from the rack, taking the first steps to heal the prisoner's body and soul. And then, when the prisoner had been returned to his usual cell, Layle turned his eyes toward the Codifier, who had attended the breaking at his request. He waited in sick anticipation to be told that he must leave the Eternal Dungeon forever because he had broken the Code.

The Codifier did not tell him this. "Whether you receive pleasure or not from your work is of no matter," the dungeon's ethical supervisor said to the young man who would one day hold the title of High Seeker. "What matters is whether you act in the best interests of the prisoner."

They were words that became Layle's mantra for the next twenty years, carrying him not only beyond his fear of using his dark desire to break prisoners, but also beyond his fear of using his dark desire in the bedroom. They were words he spoke to himself late at night, when staring down at his love-mate, who smiled in his sleep from the tender caresses he had received from the High Seeker during their love-making. That Layle's mind had been far away, in a black dungeon where he tortured his screaming love-mate, was of no matter. The best interests of his love-mate came first, and if Layle must use the foulest part of himself to bring joy to Elsdon, then it was worth what the Codifier had strangely referred to as his "sacrifice."

He had never expected this, though: to bring joy to Elsdon while thinking only of his love for the other Seeker.

He had no need to dream of Elsdon in pain; he could feel the strain in Elsdon's muscles, the shaking flesh, the sweat that poured like blood from a rock. He could smell the rank stink of fear and torment. Layle could hear Elsdon's moans and groans and the rasping of his breath as the junior Seeker strove to keep from screaming. Layle could see, whenever he raised his eyes, the wrists bound by the frigid steel.

And he thought of none of this. It was there in the background, as once he had felt in the background the gentle words and soft touches he had given to Elsdon while they made love. Now Elsdon's pain was in the back of the stage – scenery that set the mood and drove his desire high. And here in the front of the stage, where once there had been a torturer destroying his victim, was the High Seeker, striving with all his skill to comfort his love-mate.

He let his finger trail down Elsdon's spine and was rewarded with a moan that seemed to contain more in it than pain. Layle knew that his skill was great. It was one of the paradoxes of his life that his acute knowledge of how to bring agony to a prisoner could also be used to bring ecstasy to his love-mate. Never before had he been fully present to witness that ecstasy; in the past, Elsdon's bliss had always been a dim shadow in the background of Layle's dark dreamings. Now, reaching down to kiss Elsdon's back and taste the sharp brine of the sweat, Layle could feel tears tickling at his eyes. He was in a place he had long since lost hope of ever

entering – a place that he had witnessed from the distance with keen longing, but to which he had never been able to find the path.

"Layle," he heard Elsdon gasp. "Layle, are you here?"

He knew why the other Seeker asked that question, at the very moment that Layle was sliding himself into the depths of his body. "I am here, my dear," Layle said softly. "I am with you." He leaned over Elsdon's back to kiss his neck. "I love you."

He heard a strangled sound then, and felt the body quiver hard, in a tell-tale manner. Alarmed, he tried to see Elsdon's face. "Are you all right?"

"All right?" The sob was clear in Elsdon's voice. "Layle, how could I be all right? You told me you *loved* me."

For a panic-stricken moment he was plunged back into his memories, into the time when he used words of love to destroy prisoners. Then he was able to rein in his fear. If Elsdon was upset by what the High Seeker was doing, he would say so. That was the long-time agreement between them, and Elsdon had never broken it.

Already Elsdon was sobbing out more words. "'All right' – you make it sound as though this were as routine as documentwork. Layle, you've never told me you loved me."

He paused in his rhythm, confused. "My dear, of course I have. Every day —"

"Not when we were making love. Never then. You were always dreaming of raping me then, and you never lied to me by saying you loved me. This is the first time you've been able to speak those words while we've been together like this."

It lashed him then, all the anguish of what was to come, and for a moment he thought that he would precede Elsdon into the breaking. He closed his eyes, driving back the pain. He dared not let that happen. The door he was forcing open was opening only because the High Master was unaware of its existence. Once the High Master learned of its existence through a breaking, the door would slam shut again. Perhaps it would open again in

the future, or perhaps not. Layle could not count on the door opening for more than one person.

He tipped his head back, hoping that the sight of gawking onlookers would cool the fire within him. But nobody was looking at him. It was clear that they thought the climax of the play had already been reached, and that anything which followed would be a denouement. That a prisoner could be tortured through his own will was exciting enough a revelation. The torturers gathered in clusters on the balcony, discussing what they had witnessed, and some of the torturers began to scurry away, evidently eager to try this new method.

All the more reason Layle should hurry matters; one of the other prisoners might reach the point of self-breaking before Elsdon did. Not that Layle would begrudge another prisoner such a gift, but all of the other prisoners deserved some measure of the pain they were undergoing. Elsdon did not.

Elsdon was groaning loudly now, and it was clearly from the passion that Layle was driving through his body. Layle kissed his neck again, wondering what steps he should take to bring this play to its finale. But, as in many occasions in the past, he underestimated his fellow Seeker. Amidst the gasps of pleasure, Elsdon said, "Love, I don't think . . . Sweet blood, do that again! . . . No, wait, you mustn't . . . Layle, no, it's too much, you're giving me too much. I won't be able to break if you keep— *Bloody blades!*"

The last was a scream as Layle plunged himself hard into the center of Elsdon's pleasure. It was a skill he had acquired long ago, to drive a prisoner into near madness by raising the prisoner's desire. It made the moment when Layle betrayed the prisoner all the more pleasurable.

Elsdon was sobbing openly now. "Layle, why . . . Sweet blood . . . Sweet, sweet blood . . . Why are you . . . I won't be able to break, love. You're giving me too much pleasure."

He said nothing; he could feel the rising tension in Elsdon's body, and he knew that the moment was nearing. He closed his eyes, trying to memorize the feel of Elsdon's body beneath his hands, to know the joy of his love-mate.

For the final moment before the betrayal.

He felt Elsdon stiffen suddenly under his body. It was a measure of the other Seeker's strength; at this point, his mind should have been hazed with the lusts of his body. But that was not Elsdon's way, to place his own pleasure over thoughts of his love-mate. "Layle!" he gasped, trying to twist his head to look back at the High Seeker. "What is it? You know something – what are you hiding from me?"

He waited for the exact moment he needed, the moment at which Elsdon's body began to near the narrow gap he had created for it. Then he said softly, his own voice gasping with desire, "You were right. Your first guess was right. This is not a dreaming; we are dead. We died together, and you were brought to hell through your love for me."

He felt the tension increase in Elsdon's body and knew that it was due both to Elsdon's growing knowledge and to the drive into the gap. "Then . . . then when I break . . ."

Layle could not forebear from running a hand through Elsdon's hair, though he knew he ought to be concentrating his thoughts on pushing Elsdon further into passion. "You will truly be reborn into new life, in both soul and body. The breaking will take you from here."

"And you?" It was a wail; Elsdon had nearly reached the point where he must enter the narrow gap of the door that Layle had opened for him. "Layle, you—"

"I will stay." He could not speak more. The passion was beginning to bind his mouth, but he knew that Elsdon would understand what lay behind the words: Layle's knowledge that the High Master would never allow the High Seeker release from his dungeon. At best, Layle's skills would be required with other prisoners. At worst . . . The High Master's rage at what he was doing now was likely.

"Layle, no!" Elsdon sobbed between groans. "I won't go; I won't leave you . . ."

He felt the tremor begin to enter Elsdon, and he leaned down for one final kiss. "My dear," he whispered, "I know that you will not remember me

where you are going. But try to find someone who will love you as much as I have loved you."

It took more strength than he had to speak the words. He could feel his own body trembling, and he knew that he was perilously close to breaking. Screaming inwardly at himself in fury, he strove with all his might to stay back, to allow Elsdon to be the one to enter through the narrow gap of breaking that would be closed in the moment of his rebirth, once the High Master learned of this door of escape.

Elsdon's sobs turned to a scream as Layle's words, and Elsdon's deep love for the High Seeker, pulled him into the breaking. His body began to pulse under Layle's hands as he reached his climax. Layle, flinging back his chest and head as his own climax began, caught a blurry glimpse of the balcony, now empty but for a single, long-bearded torturer, witnessing the escape with serious eyes and a small smile on his face.

And then Elsdon's body was fading under Layle's hands, disappearing, and at the same moment Layle felt the ground begin to rumble as the High Master roared, sensing the escape of a prisoner. The sound swallowed the last of Elsdon's scream – swallowed too the scream of Layle as he entered into his own breaking. He felt his body falling, tumbling through the empty space where Elsdon had been. Pain lashed through him as he fell from the platform and crashed onto the floor.

The door of escape shut behind Elsdon, and Layle was left behind in the eternal torment of his loss.

CHAPTER SIX

He had been reborn for the space of a day. Never had he imagined that the pain could be so great.

After he crossed the border, he stopped and looked back at what he had left behind. The land of his birth. The work of his childhood dreamings. The only person who had loved him since his mother's death.

The only person who ever would.

Behind him, at his back, he could feel all that lay ahead in his journey. He would use the art of his trade to force his way into audience with the Queen of Yclau. There, he would tell the Queen that he had murdered fourteen men and raped an innocent virgin before he turned sixteen. He would tell her that he had spent the past three years as the King's Torturer, destroying every prisoner he was given, with all the skill of his cruelty. He would tell her that he had entered her land unlawfully, a border-breacher from Yclau's enemy neighbor, with no excuse for his violation except the Yclau blood of his mother, long since sullied by his deeds.

He thought it unlikely that he would live that day out. And if the Queen permitted him to live, and did not send him back to Vovim where death awaited him, he saw no reason why she should give him the opportunity he craved, to work in the Eternal Dungeon. And even if a strange miracle should occur and she should give him that gift, he saw no reason that the men who ran the Eternal Dungeon would permit him to exercise his skills.

Why should they? His only skill was to destroy. He knew nothing about helping a prisoner to rebirth.

The border was so very close. The Hidden Dungeon lay less than a day's run from the border; that was the only reason he had been able to accomplish this escape. He could go back now and tell the High Master of the Hidden Dungeon that he had slipped out of the dungeon only in order to cool the hot blood of his youth with some bed-play. He knew that his talents were great enough to achieve this deception.

His own master would not be fooled, but Master Aeden was a forgiving man. He would be forgiven again, and loved again, if he returned. But if he

stayed away . . . Every moment he stayed away increased the chance that he had lost the only love he would ever receive in his youth or manhood.

He felt himself sink to his knees upon the winter-cold ground; his chest was heaving. He wanted to pray to the gods for guidance, but he feared that Mercy considered him a traitor for leaving her land. As for the torture-god . . . For so many years he had dreamt of the proud moment when he would enter hell's dungeon. There, in the most perfect place of torture that could be imagined, hell's High Master would give him work suitable to his talents.

The dreaming lay within him like a strangled corpse. He knew what awaited him upon death.

Something slipped from his hands: the only belonging he had taken with him in his long run to the border. Fumbling with cold hands, he reached forward to pick it up. Then he stopped. The pages had flown open when the book fell; there, under his hands, lay a passage that he had not noticed during his first and only reading of the contraband volume.

"We ask our prisoners to risk their lives and their souls," the black book said. "We must be willing to risk the same for them."

Slowly he picked up the book, hugging it to his body. He looked once more upon the treasures of his old life, of all the joy that lay in his time of dark deeds. Then he scrambled to his feet and turned his face toward his new life – toward the pain of rebirth.

o—o—o

Water dripped in the corner of the cell. The air was cold. Fire burnt in the room, but it was in Layle's back and head and heart.

He felt the emptiness he remembered from his first breaking, twenty years before. At that time, beyond the pain of his rebirth, joy had awaited him. And now—

"Did it work?"

He turned his head, which still ached from his crash onto the floor. Elsdon remained where Layle had left him, kneeling upon his shins and forearms,

his torso lifted up by the support.

"I don't know," said Layle. "Do you feel reborn?"

With a scream, Elsdon launched himself from the bed; the pillows that had been supporting his torso flew like tree-petals in springtime. The junior Seeker landed upon Layle's abdomen, his legs straddling Layle's body, and his fists pounding on Layle's chest. "It worked!" he cried. "Tell me it worked!"

"It worked," Layle said, caught between pain and laughter. "You were there the whole time. Oh, Elsdon, I heard every word you spoke—"

With another scream, Elsdon launched himself onto Layle's neck, biting and kissing indiscriminately until Layle's laughter overwhelmed him and took him prisoner.

Only a thumping upon the wall from their long-suffering neighbor in the next Seeker cell put an end to their incoherent cries and laughter. The two men subsided slowly, Elsdon's head now resting in the hollow of Layle's shoulder as the High Seeker stroked his hair, feeling the emptiness fill with something greater than had been there before. It had been that way after the first breaking also.

He felt Elsdon's breath upon his chest, sweetly warm and moist. Elsdon's fingers played with the hairs around his nipples, which were stiff from the usual coolness of the underground cavern in which the Eternal Dungeon was housed.

"We'll have to tell Mr. Bergsen," Elsdon said in a tranquil voice. "He'll be delighted that his idea worked. Layle, I've seen you fool prisoners in the rack room, but even so, I never guessed that you were so good at play-acting."

Layle smiled into his hair. "And I never would have guessed that you played Torturer and Prisoner when you were young."

Elsdon moved his hand so that it rested upon Layle's heart. "I was scared to do so for years. Then one of my school-friends suggested that I play a torturer who secretly healed the wounds of prisoners and helped them to escape from further torment. After that, I played the game every day."

Layle chuckled. "Destiny. You were meant to become a Seeker. Or a play-actor."

"Bloody blades, no!" Elsdon buried his face into the hollow of Layle's body, trying unsuccessfully to hide his reddening cheeks. "I was terrible today. The way I laughed at the worst moment—"

"Your amusement at the guard's entrance startled me, I'll admit."

"Oh, I couldn't help *that*. Layle, there you were, speaking with all the deep-voiced authority of the High Seeker, and you were talking to a *broom*."

Layle lifted his head so that he could see the object in question, leaning against the wall next to the door. He said with a smile, "It looked different in the dreaming."

"Well, that wasn't the laughter I was referring to. I meant at the beginning of the play, when you entered the bedroom, and I went all hysterical on you—"

Layle kissed his head again. "That didn't disturb me, my dear. I knew that it would be hard for you to enter into your part, when you had so little training at play-acting. You did much better than I'd imagined you would. The only point at which I nearly broke out of my dreaming was when the torture began. Your scream seemed real—"

"It was."

Elsdon's voice has turned low. Layle lay still a moment, fighting the impulse to grab Elsdon's face and force it into view. Then he carefully pulled himself and his love-mate into a sitting position and allowed Elsdon to lay his head upon Layle's shoulder again, shielding his expression.

"I hurt you?" Layle said finally, trying to keep his voice level.

"No worse than I've been hurt with prisoners." Elsdon's voice was level also. "You know how it is, Layle – I get so caught into the prisoner's tale that it's hard for me not to feel his pain. And you made the dreaming seem

real to me. Even though I couldn't see what you could see, I could almost feel the manacles closing upon me. . . ."

Layle gave a soft curse and held Elsdon tight, then quickly released him, uncertain whether his touch was welcome at this moment. Elsdon raised his head then; a soft smile grazed his lips.

"You were wrong, you know. My love for you isn't a flaw."

Layle stared at the cold floor upon which they sat. "So you noticed that."

"Of course I did, love. It was the central point of our play. You were trying to tell me that I mustn't love you – that my love for you would cause me unnecessary pain, and that I must remove that flaw through a breaking." He kissed Layle on the High Seeker's motionless lips and said, "Love, I followed you into the hell of your dreamings. I allowed myself to see within your darkness. I did that out of love for you. Do you truly consider that a weakness?"

Layle pulled Elsdon tight then, pressing his face against the junior Seeker's hair so as to wipe away the moisture in the corners of his eyes. "The weakness is mine, that I let you come with me. That I can never find the strength to send you away."

"Then stop trying," Elsdon said firmly. "You tried to send away your dark desire, and if you had succeeded, what would you be today? You're High Seeker *because* of your desire, Layle, not despite it. Your struggles with it gave you the strength you have today. And if you send me away—"

"Yes." Layle's voice was muffled. "Yes, Elsdon. I know you're right. It's just hard sometimes to believe— Tell me the truth. When I walked in here at the beginning of the dreaming, were you truly afraid?"

Elsdon placed his hands on both sides of Layle's face and lifted the High Seeker's head. He waited until Layle's gaze had bonded with his before he said, "Yes."

Layle swallowed, but he did not break his gaze. Prisoners must not break their gaze with their Seekers. "You still want me." He was surprised to hear that the words emerged as a statement rather than a question.

"Of course I do. Layle, I wasn't afraid *of* you; I was afraid *for* you. It was the first time you'd gone fully into a dreaming since your madness."

He let out a bit of his breath. "The play between us had only begun."

"But I had to wait an *hour* for you to arrive, Layle! You told me you needed time to prepare yourself in the sitting room, and I dared not disturb you. By the time you finally arrived, I was certain I had lost you again."

Layle released the deepest part of his breath. He kissed Elsdon on the forehead, saying, "I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to frighten you. I needed time to talk to the torturer who knew the Code. . . . I needed to talk to my master."

He saw understanding flame through Elsdon's face. "That must have been a conversation worth hearing," the junior Seeker said quietly.

Layle nodded, but he could not bring himself to speak of it yet. Instead he wiped the crumbs of tear-dust from Elsdon's face and asked, "Are you all right now?"

"Of course I am, Layle. You know I recover from such things – why are you worrying about me?"

"Because, Mr. Taylor, I prefer that my Seekers be in good health before I reprimand them for breaking orders."

Elsdon slid his tongue swiftly over his lips as he stared at the piece of ground that Layle had been staring at a moment before. He began to clutch his hands together.

"I told you before we started," Layle said. "I did not merely tell you but I ordered you, in my capacity as High Seeker. I said that we would not make love while I was in the dreaming. We would play out a scene of torture and rescue in hopes that this would satisfy the cravings of my dark desire, but I would not touch you sexually. The danger was too high that I would lose control and rape you. Do you remember this order?"

"Yes, sir." Elsdon's gaze remained on the ground.

"You manipulated me into a promise that forced me to have sex with you. Do you deny this?"

"No, sir."

"Do you have a defense for what you did?"

"No, sir." The words were spoken without hesitation.

That was the problem, of course. Elsdon had not done this blindly. He had done it in full knowledge that he was breaking orders and would face the consequences afterwards of his disobedience. Suspension from his duties? Loss of his title as Seeker? Elsdon could not have known how seriously Layle would treat this offense, nor what the price would be for what he had done.

Layle sighed, trying to remember why it was that he had decided four years ago that the High Seeker could be permitted to love-bond with one of the Seekers under his supervision. Finally he gave up the struggle to understand his motives. He crooked his finger, using it to lift Elsdon's chin. "Thank you," he said softly. "It was a masterly display of your talents as a Seeker."

Elsdon's expression was so dumbfounded that Layle could not forebear from laughing. After a moment, Elsdon joined in and leaned into his embrace. "No long sessions on the rack?" he said.

"I may have you mop a floor or two. Anything more than that would be hypocritical, given my debt to you. For you have given us, my dear, our new way to make love. To make love in a way we never have before. When we're together, I won't leave you by going into a dreaming; I'll simply remember what passed between us today. That memory will be enough to bring my desire forth."

Elsdon sighed as he hugged Layle tighter. "That will be delightful, to have you enter into my world of love. And when I enter into yours—"

Elsdon raised his head, apparently alerted by the sudden tension in Layle's muscles. He frowned at the High Seeker. "Layle, surely you didn't think I was going to make you stay in this world *every* time we went to bed together! I know that it's as hard for you to remain outside your dreaming as it is for me to stay within your dreaming. Fair shares – you'll come into my world, and I'll come into yours."

"There's no need," Layle replied in a taut voice. "I explained to you already, I can remain with you here. There's no need for you to undergo pain again—"

"Oh, bloody blades, Layle, don't act like a brainless Vovimian!"

Layle realized after a moment that he was gaping, and shut his mouth. Elsdon, looking chagrined that he had chosen this common Yclau insult, said more quietly, "Love, sometimes I think you leave that keen Seekerly mind of yours at the doorway to this bedroom. I *enjoyed* play-acting with you. It was painful, yes, but no more painful than being a Seeker, and I don't recall that you ever let me use pain as an excuse for neglecting my duties while you were training me. You drove me through all the labor of transforming myself into a Seeker; you knew how great the rewards would be for me. Are you going to stop me from undergoing the same pleasure of learning how to play-act?"

Layle decided that his brain had certainly been left behind somewhere beyond the door; he could not seem to find a response to this. Finally he said, "I never meant it to happen more than once. Just that one time to feed my desire and keep it from breaking free—"

"Oh, sweet blood!" Elsdon pretended to swoon onto Layle's lap. "High Seeker, you have most certainly lost your wits. That beautiful play we just performed, thanks to your desire – after all that, you're going to talk about chaining your desire or being chained by it? Layle, you owe the dark desire your *life*. Of course you can't let it run wild, but neither can you keep it in the darkest cell of a dungeon—"

"Apprentice it."

Elsdon stopped in mid-sentence. "Pardon?"

"I'll turn it into my apprentice," Layle said slowly. "I'll take the torturous murderer that is my desire, and I'll train it to use its skills at breaking to bring good to the world."

Elsdon smiled, pulling himself up into a sitting position on Layle's lap. He patted the High Seeker on his head, saying, "I knew that you'd find your wits eventually. Layle, this is going to be such fun; I've already thought of

a dozen plays we can perform. We could be Yclau soldiers who were captured by Vovimian soldiers, and you'd be forced to watch as I was raped and tortured, and afterwards you would help to heal my soul by making love to me—" He looked down to where he was sitting on Layle's lap. "Oh, you like that one, do you?"

"Elsdon, stop," Layle said, hoarsely and far too weakly.

"Stop? Why on earth should we stop? Let's perform that one now, Layle. I haven't even told you about the part where the enemy soldiers come back, and you're forced to fight them for me. . . ."

Layle felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. He leaned forward and kissed Elsdon lightly, saying, "My dear, I can see that you're going to shower me once more with gifts I'd not thought to imagine. But later. Your shift is beginning."

Elsdon squirmed in Layle's lap in order to look at the water clock, dripping in the corner. "Bloody blades," he grumbled, and scrambled to his feet, his hand already reaching for the neat pile of clothes he had left in the middle of the floor. "Layle, how do you always know when the night shift is beginning, even without looking at the clock?"

"From the High Master's earthquake."

Elsdon paused, his half-hose dangling from his hand. "What?"

Layle gave a light chuckle. "When the guards at the entrance to the Eternal Dungeon open the gates to let out the cave bats for their nightly feeding, they're especially forceful in slamming the gates wide open. The crash causes a slight vibration through the entire dungeon. It feels like the beginning of a cave-in."

Elsdon grimaced as he hopped on one foot, trying to pull on his half-hose. "I'm glad I'm not as sensitive to touch as you are – I'd be shivering with horror at the beginning of every night shift. Though granted that your sensitivity has its uses in this room. . . . Where's my hood?"

"I'll get it." Layle pulled himself off the floor, stretched to ease his cramped muscles, and walked toward the night-table where his hood and Elsdon's lay companionably mingled.

Behind him, Elsdon was grumbling again. "I hate these dusk-to-dawn shifts. If I were a High Seeker fashioning shifts, or even a High Master . . . Layle, is what you told me about the torture-god true? That he's supposed to be a benevolent master? Because, if so, I'd like you to tell me more about the Vovimian religion. That's not the picture of Vovim we were given in school. . . ."

His words were a faint background in Layle's mind. The High Seeker stood by the night-table, his hand upon Elsdon's hood, as he stared down at the yellowed etching.

The whorled pit was filled with dozens of ice-cells, each lovingly depicted, along with the torture taking place in them. Ice hung everywhere, except in the places where fire was being used. Above it all, standing alone on a walkway that served as a balcony, was a long-bearded torturer, holding a black object that might have been a pincer, or might have been a hot iron.

He felt Elsdon's hand touch his shoulder. The junior Seeker said quietly, "Wherever he is, Layle, I'm sure he has forgiven you."

Layle made no reply. He continued to stare down at the tiny figure, so carefully drawn that an onlooker could see the small smile on the man's face as he stared down at the torture.

Elsdon's hand suddenly went tight upon Layle's shoulder, like the strap of a rack biting in. "Layle," he said, "am I entering a dreaming, or are there fewer people in that picture than when we looked at it before?"

"Elsdon," he replied patiently, "you've only seen this etching once. I've stared at it a thousand times, and—" He stopped abruptly, his eye moving back and forth over the image.

The woman was missing. The woman whom he had gazed at a thousand times as a child – the woman who was being roasted by a torturer. Nor could he find the man who had been encased in ice in the glittering cavern. The people bound in the blood-dark pool were there – some of them. Some of their torturers were missing too. The cavern with the hanging souls was only half filled.

His gaze skittered back and forth, seeking a familiar pair, but the etching disappeared from his eyes as Elsdon came round to the other side of the night-table and pulled the thick paper up, peeking at its underside.

He looked up. Layle could see only his eyes from behind the paper, peering upwards with dark soberness. "Love," Elsdon said, "do you know the title of this picture?"

Layle shook his head. "The copy that hung in my childhood home was framed, with no indication on the outside of who made the etching or what it was called. I could tell from its style that it was old – far older than the Eternal Dungeon – but that was all. The art tradesman who found this copy of the etching had to locate it by description."

Silently, Elsdon laid down the paper so that the underside showed. At the bottom of the page, written so faintly in pencil that Layle had not noticed it before, was the name of the artist, the date of her birth and death four centuries before, and three words: "The Eternal Dungeon."

Layle met the eyes of Elsdon, who had returned to stand by the High Seeker. Then, with the same movement of eye, both men looked down at the paper. Layle turned it over.

After a moment Elsdon said in a small voice, "There are definitely fewer people in the picture now."

Layle made no reply; he had found the pair he was looking for. They were in a higher ice-cell than they had been before – the highest ice-cell of all, in fact. A man in red was lying upon the Adoration, tiny rivulets of sweat covering his body, but no manacles bound him to the platform, as they once had. Nearby, a green-clothed torturer watched the self-breaking with compassion clear upon his face.

Layle heard Elsdon's breath pull swiftly in, but he did not turn his gaze to see whether his love-mate had noticed the same scene. His own gaze had returned to the long-bearded torturer on the balcony, who might have been holding a pincer, or might have been holding a black-bound volume.

I can be what I have been till now, one of the lowest members of the higher order. Or I can join the lower order of mankind and be among the best of

them.

Layle touched the torturer lightly with his finger, feeling the beginnings of a smile creep onto his face. He murmured, "I think Mercy will be pleased this time with your decision to stay."

He felt the moisture of breath upon his ear. A voice whispered, "If Mercy walks in the world above, I know what form she has taken." The voice was followed by a warm kiss on the ear; Elsdon added, "I'll see you at dawn, love." He reached for his hood.

Layle was still staring at the etching when he heard Elsdon open the bedroom door. He whirled round. "Wait!"

Elsdon paused, watching as Layle quickly clothed himself and pulled on his hood. By the time that the High Seeker came forward to join him, Elsdon was smiling. "You're going to work with the prisoners again."

It was not a question, but Layle nodded. "I have an idea for a method to help your new prisoner. I'll tell you on our way. . . ." He flipped down the face-cloth of his hood, then put his arm around Elsdon's shoulders and steered him toward the door to the corridor. His arm was still guiding his love-mate when the door closed behind them. The Seekers disappeared down the corridor, their voices fading, until no sound was left but for the endless drip of water.

o—o—o

Back in the bedroom shared by the High Seeker and his love-mate, the lamp flickered low, casting deep shadows upon the etching. The torturer on the balcony smiled as he looked down upon his dungeon.

The transfer to the new host had been as painless as always: his lowly servant had joyfully embraced the opportunity to serve his master in a higher capacity. And the timing had gone well also. The High Master had joined with his host just in time to exchange a few words with the Consultant whose Code book had so intrigued him, before the man began his work. Then the High Master had been able to witness the prisoner's searching through the eyes and mind of a host who knew the Consultant

well enough to be able to tell whether the man was trying to deceive the High Master.

The man had not deceived him. How very odd. The High Master never ceased to marvel at how, even with his divine powers, he could learn new truths each century from his servants.

He felt the touch of his host's mind, urging his hands forward. He did not resist, but joined his thoughts fully with his host as High Master Aeden opened the *Code of Seeking* and began to read it again, in hopes of learning new ways to bring justice.

o—o—o
o—o—o

. . . Nonetheless, it is possible for more conscientious historians to reconstruct the steps Layle Smith took to emerge from his madness by noting the first recorded instance of his use of "play-acting."

This is, of course, Layle Smith's most famous contribution to the overarching principles of transformation therapy, which were developed by dozens of Seekers and which now serve as the backbone for psychologists' interactions with criminals and other deeply troubled patients. "Play-acting" has proved so valuable a form of therapy that it is often used with patients suffering only from mild ailments of the mind.

The principle behind "play-acting" (I should add for the lay reader) is that it is impossible for someone dwelling outside of the delusional world which a patient has formed to change the patient's outlook by rejecting that world. Rather, he must enter into that world, much as an actor enters into a play. By acting as though the world is real, the psychologist can gradually help the patient to recognize any inadequacies in his world-view.

But the conscientious psychologist must go further than that and recognize that delusional world-building is simply a distorted form of the creative impulse that is found most especially in young children, artists, and seers. Thus the psychologist must be on the alert for any signs that the delusions have caused the patient to reach a higher understanding than the outside world offers him.

Though the second part of this principle is often neglected by arrogant psychologists, it is quite clear in the earliest instance of the use of "play-acting," which occurred in the sixth month of 359. It is no coincidence that this date is three years after Layle Smith first began to enter into madness and two months after he finally returned to his full duties as a Seeker. Layle Smith himself acknowledged, in a brief note to the High Master of the Hidden Dungeon, that he "came to realize the full value of play-acting with prisoners by understanding the truthfulness of my dark dreamings." This sentence has been distorted by revisionist historians to mean that Layle Smith believed that his delusional world was true in the mundane sense. But the context of Layle Smith's sentence shows that he had in mind something akin to artistic creativity and religious visions, and that his time in madness, however painful for him, opened up to him mental and spiritual vistas that he had previously striven to avoid.

Revisionist historians who sneer at Layle Smith's time in madness and see it as akin to the darkest abuses that took place in the Eternal Dungeon have forgotten this: that the potential for evils of the mind did not disappear with the coming of modern psychology – rather, the potential increased. Would that the modern world had its own Layle Smith who could open up our dark dreamings and show us where the treasure lies amidst the poison.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

Transformation
HISTORICAL NOTE

At the tender age of fourteen, I decided to write a book on the history of the Agrarian Revolution.

I had conceived of this idea while at a British school, attending a history class which, in the space of an entire term, covered the changes in farming over several centuries, and especially the conflicts that arose between the aristocracy and the working class. The conflicts arose because many members of the aristocracy seized peasant farming land and made it their own. One of the means by which the ruling class ensured farming profits

thereafter was through the Corn Laws ("corn" being the British word for the most important grain in any given territory – in England, that meant wheat). These laws regulated the price of grain. By the early nineteenth century, a combination of high bread prices (due to the Corn Laws) and bad harvests were resulting in starvation conditions for the working class. As a result, reformers arose, demanded expanded representation in Parliament.

"I want to write a book about the Agrarian Revolution," I told my father the following summer. "Will you bring me with you to the Library of Congress?"

He did. It was not the first time I had visited America's national library with my father, who is a literary historian; as I recall, he began taking me there when I was eleven. But the summer of 1978, when I had turned fifteen, was the first time I had visited there as a researcher. My father showed me how to look up titles in the *National Union Catalog*, a book catalogue that filled an entire wall with hundreds of volumes. (These were the days before computers took over the job of keeping such records.) Afterwards, he asked me which aspect of the Agrarian Revolution I wanted to research first.

I thought about this, and then replied, in my bloodthirsty manner, "The Peterloo Massacre."

The Peterloo Massacre occurred in Manchester on August 16, 1819, when a peaceful group of reformers held a rally, bringing along their wives and children. Cavalry soldiers dispersed the crowd, using sabers. As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* puts it, "In 10 minutes the place was cleared except for bodies. The numbers of killed and wounded were disputed; probably about 500 people were injured and 11 killed. [Henry] Hunt and the other radical leaders were arrested, tried, and convicted – Hunt being sent to prison for two years."

"You might want to look at some newspapers," my father suggested, and soon I was immersed in 1819 newspaper accounts of the massacre.

Twenty-four years later, I handed my Muse a story about prison abuse, and he handed me back a story about the Agrarian Revolution. That story was "Debt Price," which would later appear in my *Master/Other* story

collection. But apparently, my Muse wasn't satisfied with giving me a novella with a 12,000-word passage in which nothing happened except that the characters experienced a series of bad harvests. Instead, while I was writing "Deception" the following year, I discovered that one of my main characters in the Eternal Dungeon series had taken part in a certain peaceful rally that ended with bloodshed and with his own arrest.

From a historical point of view, "Deception" is anachronistic. "Deception" takes place in 357, while Weldon's arrest occurred in 339. In the Eternal Dungeon's world, three years pass for every one year in our world, so, while "Deception" is set roughly in the year 1881, Weldon's arrest would have been roughly in 1875, three decades after the Corn Laws were repealed in Britain. But the general ferment for workers' rights continued throughout the nineteenth century until, in the 1880s, trade unions began to be formed, taking the place once held by medieval guilds. At that point, conflict between the unions and other forces in society became inevitable.

Nothing more needs to be said about the historical aspects of *Transformation*. If the reader detects only a faint whisper of societal change in this novel, this is because the characters themselves have experienced no more than that.

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=== *The Balance* ===

> According as it is with the laws that belong to the present life, so shall the Judge act with most just deed towards the man of the Lie and the man of the Right, and him whose false things and good things balance.
>
> —*Avesta: Yasna* 33 (translated by L. H. Mills).

***The Balance* 1**
TRUTH AND LIES

The year 359, the fourth month.

Historical accounts of the Eternal Dungeon usually skip directly from its most exciting event – the madness of its first High Seeker – to its second most exciting event, an incident that would change the nature of the centuries-old dungeon and revolutionize forever our nation's treatment of prisoners and other societal misfits. This is a shame, for it is a clear that the second event owed a great deal to the first.

It is necessary in this volume, therefore, to linger upon small episodes that, at the time, must have seemed insignificant. The first of these, of course, is the return of Layle Smith to his prisoners.

The documents of the Eternal Dungeon, while frustratingly vague about the nature of the High Seeker's madness, do give us detailed information about the first searching Layle Smith undertook three years later, when he finally returned fully to his duties. We learn from these documents that, although the High Seeker had planned to return to searching prisoners, the exact timing of his return was forced on him by circumstances.

Moreover, the circumstances in question were not ideal. Elsdon Taylor, the Seeker who had cared for Layle Smith during his illness, had recently entered into spiritual isolation in the dungeon's crematorium in order to mourn the death of his father. He was therefore unavailable to serve as a chaperone to Layle Smith, as he had throughout the most serious phase of the High Seeker's mental illness.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the greatest number of documents from this period reveal the anxiety of witnesses as to whether Layle Smith would lose control again. The danger seemed particularly strong, given the crime the prisoner had committed . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

When Seward Sobel was nineteen years old, he visited a diviner. Not many people in the queendom of Yclau still worshipped the fates, and those who did had an evil reputation. Seward was not bothered by such matters; he arrived as a skeptic and expected to remain so.

His friends – fellow members of the Queen's guard – had already emerged from the tent one by one, chortling over the unlikely futures that had been divined for them. Seward entered the tent grinning. His grin faded, though, as he saw the surroundings.

The surroundings were not horrific; rather, they were pitiful. He had seen etchings of the diviners' rooms in ancient days: peacock feathers spread over life-sized statues of the fates, with magnificent piles of food at the feet of the fates to show the worshippers' love.

The diviner was a very old woman, dressed in a gown that had long since passed the stage of being a rag. She had decorated the tent as best she could with reminders of her religion's glorious past: instead of peacock feathers, there were sparrow feathers; instead of life-sized statues, there were misshapen branches crudely carved into objects that had little resemblance to the divine, except in the eyes of the creator.

At the feet of the carvings were offerings to the fates: a bowl of fruit that too obviously could have served as the diviner's daily meal, and five objects that had been tossed there by Seward's laughing friends: a bootlace, a squashed penny, a used handkerchief, a toothpick, and a tract on the Yclau religion of transformation and rebirth that had replaced the worship of the fates.

It was perhaps a sign of Seward's difference from his friends – or rather, his potential difference – that his first instinct was to flee the tent in shame. The diviner had already seen him, though; she beckoned him forward with a forceful gesture. He came to her unwillingly, confessing with a stammer that he had brought no offering.

The diviner looked at him with canny eyes. "The fates require no gifts," she said. "They are immortal, without need for human trappings. They

accept our offerings for our own sake, so that our souls may be better prepared to face the truth of the life they have established for us."

She gave him his divining then. It was a simple one: "Your goal is high. It will bring you pain."

He would have laughed as his friends had, but something held him back. "I've already gone beyond my goal," he said politely. "My only goal was to be a guard in some capacity, and I've been granted the high honor of serving as a guard at the Queen's palace."

The diviner stared him steadily in the eye. "The fates do not lie," she said.

He left then, promising to bring an offering the next day, but when he arrived the following morning, carrying a basket overflowing with food from the Queen's own kitchen, he found that the tent was gone. He never saw the diviner again, and his offering to the fates went unfulfilled.

He changed after that, all his friends agreed. He laughed just as much as before, and he joined in the games of the young men who worked in the palace. No one could accuse him of growing soberly pious, much less cracked in the head. But every now and then, when a death-sentence prisoner passed him, bound for the terrible fates found in the Eternal Dungeon beneath the palace, he would stop speaking abruptly, and his eyes would follow the prisoner, as though he and the prisoner were one.

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"War crimes?" said Seward. "That's an unusual charge, isn't it?"

He was standing in the entry hall of the Eternal Dungeon, next to Mr. Boyd, senior day guard for Weldon Chapman, a Seeker who took the day shift. Although they had both worked in the dungeon for many years, Seward rarely had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Boyd, since Seward, as a senior night guard, undertook his duties while his own Seeker searched prisoners, during the night shift.

Or so went the theory. Seward glanced over at the High Seeker, who had just come on duty for the night. After this brief visit to the entry hall, Seward knew, the High Seeker's entire night shift would be spent shut away in his office, signing documentwork. He would only emerge once the

return of the bats to the underground dungeon signalled the beginning of dawn.

There was a time, Seward thought with a touch of unusual bitterness, when the prisoners of the Eternal Dungeon sought to hide themselves from the much-feared High Seeker. Now the opposite seemed to be true.

He turned back to Mr. Boyd – Seward had never learned the other guard's first name, and in the formal setting of the Eternal Dungeon this hardly mattered. The younger guard was saying as he flipped a page, "He has led five unauthorized raids on enemy villages during the past year. He keeps saying that he's forced into the raids by circumstances, and his men back him, but the high command finally got tired of his excuses. They figured we'd have the best chance of finding out the truth."

"He's an officer, then?" Seward, through long habit, averted his eyes from the documentwork on Weldon Chapman's new prisoner. He could depend on Mr. Boyd not to offer him private information on the prisoner.

"A lesser officer. He received his rank last year, and no doubt the man that promoted him is regretting it now. You know, the army really ought to hire a Seeker to make all their decisions for them. It would save them the trouble of having to withdraw from making bad judgments."

Seward smiled but said, "Seekers aren't infallible."

"No." Mr. Boyd's gaze drifted away from him. Seward could guess that he was staring at the rigid-backed figure of the High Seeker. Then Mr. Boyd snapped shut the documents box and said, "I'm less worried about Seekers' fallibility than about guards' fallibility. You know that we have a new junior guard in training, Mr. Sobel."

Seward nodded, straddling a chair with an inward sigh of satisfaction at relieving his aching feet. For most of the past three years he had done documentwork during his shift, released from his usual duties by the High Seeker's illness. But the tedium of tying papers with ribbons and filing them in the appropriate boxes had finally become so great that he had asked and been granted permission to take Mr. Boyd's duties for one day, in order to allow the other guard an opportunity to visit his aging parents during the daytime.

"Mr. Meakem," Seward replied. "I had a chance to talk with him briefly when he came on duty. He seems eager to be of use."

"They all are, till they see what the job entails," Mr. Boyd said sourly. He had just arrived back from his visit to the lighted world, and he was still dressed in a plum-colored suit, which made him stand out amidst the grey-uniformed guards milling about in the entry hall. "Mr. Chapman has had eight junior guards leave him since the departure of Gerson. It's as though Gerson jinxed the role of junior guard for every man that followed."

"I'm sure Mr. Urman will be able to keep him in hand," said Seward, referring to the High Seeker's junior night guard, who was presently training to become senior night guard for Weldon Chapman. Seward's gaze had wandered away again, toward the High Seeker, who was now in discussion with Mr. Chapman, no doubt about the Seeker's new prisoner. Seward supposed that he should at least be glad that the High Seeker was now willing to assist other Seekers with problematic prisoners – that had not been the case until recently. If his willingness to assist other Seekers meant that his own guards spent more months in idleness . . . Well, Seward had known that his time in this dungeon would not be pure pleasure.

After all, he could have arrived here as a prisoner.

He felt a jerk of the heart, as he often did when this thought came to him. When he looked back at Mr. Boyd, he saw that the younger guard was frowning, apparently aware that Seward's thoughts were not on their conversation. Seeking to mend the tear he had made in their discussion, Seward said, "Mr. Urman is a competent guard."

"When his mind's on his work." Mr. Boyd, easy at forgiveness, gave a smile. "His thoughts are on the girl he's courting these days. You know how men are who are women-tied."

Seward gave a smile to show he appreciated the joke aimed at himself; then his eyes drifted back to the High Seeker. Seward's wife – whose gifts lay in compassion rather than insight – had nonetheless told him, "The High Seeker needs to return to searching his own prisoners." If his wife could see that – if the entire dungeon could see it – why couldn't the High Seeker?

"I suppose it's harder if you're him."

Seward turned back toward Mr. Boyd, startled. "Who?"

Mr. Boyd laughed and jerked his thumb toward the High Seeker. "Who else? The man whose shadow you are. The man you've been thinking about the whole time we've been talking. It must be hard for him to return his mind to work, when it's been off— Where do you suppose his mind has been? Off at hell?"

Seward thought it was more likely that the High Seeker's mind had been trapped in a dungeon that was the opposite of everything he had been trying to make the Eternal Dungeon into, but he said nothing of this. The High Seeker was crippled by enough gossip without having his senior night guard join in the game. Indeed, it was hardly surprising that the High Seeker hesitated to return to work. The eyes of everyone in this dungeon would be upon him – it could be fairly said that the eyes of the entire world would be upon him, such was the extent of his reputation. Failure with his first prisoner after his illness could mean the end of his career.

"I'll talk with you later," Seward said to Mr. Boyd, barely taking in the other guard's look of sympathetic understanding as he stepped away and began to walk across the entry hall to the hooded man who mastered the Eternal Dungeon.

Few obstacles stood in his way. The entry hall was a high, broad cavern that contained little except tables and chairs pushed against the walls, where they could easily be hidden by the shadows if a prisoner entered the hall. Now, though, the perimeter of the hall was bright with lamplight and the chatter of guards awaiting new prisoners. Seward found himself thinking of Mr. Urman, whose training would be completed soon and who would be transferred into the care of Weldon Chapman. Six months before, Mr. Urman had told Seward that he could no longer stand the idleness and would seek a transfer. Seward had rounded upon him with all the fury of a mother wolf protecting her children, but it had made no difference. It had been a full year since the High Seeker's day guards had resigned, and the Codifier had not bothered to replace them. It was doubtful that anyone would have taken their positions.

At the time of Layle Smith's madness, the dungeon inhabitants had been united behind their High Seeker, doing everything they could to keep his mind from destructing. Yet fame is fickle: as it became less and less certain that the High Seeker would recover the powers that had won him renown throughout the world, the dungeon dwellers had gradually turned away from him in indifference or disgust. So few remained loyal to Layle Smith now: the High Seeker's companion Elsdon Taylor, two or three of the junior Seekers who modelled themselves after him, and a handful of senior members of the dungeon who had worked alongside him for many years.

And the High Seeker's shadow, Seward Sobel, who had been with Layle Smith since the beginning.

The High Seeker was in the midst of turning away from Weldon Chapman when Seward reached him. Seward found his gaze lingering upon his Seeker, looking for changes from the old times. He had seen the High Seeker little more than any other dungeon dwellers had during the time of his illness; Layle Smith had asked for assistance during that period from Elsdon Taylor and Weldon Chapman, but from no one else. Seward wondered whether the same man he had known lay behind the closed face-cloth of the hood, or whether the High Seeker had been irremediably altered during his absence.

The High Seeker's eyes, always cool, raked over Seward as though his senior night guard were a prisoner worthy of being racked. "Yes, Mr. Sobel," he said. "Did you have something you wished to say to me?"

Mr. Sobel was touched by the slight sickness he had felt in his stomach ever since the early days, when his attempts to reach out to a young Seeker in friendship had been rebuffed with a coldness like midwinter wind. He opened his mouth to reply, and then realized, too late, that he had not come prepared with any excuse for speaking to the High Seeker.

Twenty-one years they had worked together, and he still needed an excuse to talk to Layle Smith. He thought this, and thought also of the time of absence when he had lingered each long night in the entry hall, far beyond the time when his shift officially ended, waiting for Layle Smith to call for his services.

Now the High Seeker's eyes were growing narrow through the holes in his hood. Seward began to open his mouth again to make some excuse for his presence when a faint scream cut through his thoughts.

The chatter in the entry hall died in an instant, as though sliced clean with a blade. For a heart's breath, everyone stared at the door that led to the prisoners' cells. Screams were a daily occurrence at the Eternal Dungeon; what had caught everyone's attention was the fact that the scream had cut off abruptly. Out of the corner of his eye, Seward saw the High Seeker's hand go to the side of his belt, as though he expected to find something there.

And then the silence was broken by a whistle – a high, hard whistle that shot through the air like a cannonball. And Seward was running, running as hard as he had ever run since the day in his youth when he saw a revolver in the hand of a man who had murder in his eyes, and whose gaze was turned toward the royal princess.

He ran as he had not run for twenty-six years: but the High Seeker reached the door before him.

CHAPTER TWO

Thatcher was having difficulty deciding who to attack first.

It was a familiar problem for him. He stood in the corner of his cell, watching the delivery of his meal. The junior guard placed the tray on his sleeping bench while the senior guard stood at the door with watchful eye and with his hand on his dagger-hilt. The junior guard was the obvious target; he kept flicking frightened glances at Thatcher. He was too obvious a target. The senior guard would flay Thatcher with his whip if he tried that tactic.

The senior guard, though . . . Ah, he was full of possibilities. "Senior" was a relative term – the older guard of the two couldn't be more than halfway through his twenties. He was gripping his dagger-hilt rather than his whip, which was just as Thatcher wanted it. And he had an assured look on his face. Thatcher liked assured looks. They were a sign that someone was about to make a mistake.

Thatcher stepped out of the corner, walking rapidly toward the junior guard. "Excuse me," he said. "I was wondering—"

The guard squealed as he spun round to face Thatcher. The senior guard's grip tightened on his dagger, but as Thatcher paused, he evidently decided to allow the junior guard to handle this challenge alone.

"Yes, Mr. Owen?" The junior guard's voice broke on Thatcher's name, and his face flooded with shame. Thatcher felt a moment of pity for the boy. Though a decade had passed, he could still remember keenly his own shame at his wavering voice at that age. Then he reminded himself who the boy was.

The enemy. No mercy for the enemy.

"I heard— Well, there was a rumor floating in the army that this dungeon has a rule book its workers must abide by, a rule book that lists a prisoner's rights." Thatcher did his best to look sheepish, as though he were imposing upon the guard's time.

The junior guard's blush receded. "The *Code of Seeking*," he said quickly. "Yes, that tells what your rights are."

"Would it be possible for me to request permission to view a copy of your Code?" Thatcher kept his voice polite. He was watching the senior guard out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, of course," said the junior guard promptly. "Any prisoner may request permission to read the part of the Code pertaining to his rights. I have a copy here—" His hand, which had been hovering near his whip, rose to his shirt.

"Mr. Meakem, step back!" The senior guard's voice was sharp. No doubt he had seen Thatcher's eye flicking over the space between himself and the junior guard, judging how far he needed to jump. The junior guard – ill-trained, it seemed – looked over his shoulder, turning his face from Thatcher. A perfect moment to pounce, but Thatcher kept his muscles relaxed, and even stepped back a couple of paces as the senior guard came forward.

"I – I'm sorry," he said to the senior guard, letting himself stammer. "I don't mean to cause trouble."

"It's no trouble, Mr. Owen." The assurance was in the senior guard's voice as well as his look. "Mr. Meakem is not yet fully trained, so it would be better if I showed you the information you have requested." He reached into his shirt pocket and brought out a small, leather-bound book, similar in appearance to the devotional book that Thatcher's grandmother had given him as a child, which told of the transformation that awaited him in the afterdeath.

Thatcher stood motionless as the senior guard stepped forward. He kept his eye on the guard's dagger, which would be natural in any case. The senior guard held forward the book to Thatcher as the junior guard – who had not stepped back as ordered – watched the procedure, obviously memorizing the senior guard's movements.

Thatcher took the book with a deliberately tentative hand. He looked down at the cover. Although the volume was the size of the mass-produced devotional books, this book had gold lettering on the cover, bearing the title of the Eternal Dungeon's Code. He opened the cover with a rough hand and took note of how the junior guard winced at his handling of the book.

"The final chapter," the senior guard told him. "You'll find that the information on your rights starts on page 78."

Thatcher began to fumble his way through the book, eliciting more winces from the junior guard, who evidently regarded this book with reverence. Thatcher turned his attention back to the book, slowing his pace of browsing as he became conscious of the senior guard's gaze narrowing. No doubt he was under orders to prevent Thatcher from reading the rest of the book, lest he uncover the Seekers' secrets. The senior guard was to Thatcher's left, against the wall opposite the sleeping bench; the junior guard had moved to the front so as to see better.

Thatcher let his pace of flipping die away and silently read the words before him. "Under no circumstances may a Seeker lie to a prisoner. . . ."

His well-wrought plan was nearly foiled by a tugging desire to burst out laughing. This book was as filled with falsehoods as the devotional book his grandmother had given him. He wondered why the Seekers, who held absolute power over their prisoners, bothered to deceive themselves.

"The final chapter, sir." The senior guard's voice was sharp again. Thatcher flinched as he looked toward the senior guard, and the book flew from his hands, landing two paces away from the junior guard. In an automatic manner, the junior guard began to kneel to pick it up.

"No!" In a flash, the senior guard's dagger was out. It was the signal Thatcher had been awaiting. He did not bother to target the senior guard's dagger arm – no doubt the senior guard was trained to defend himself against such attacks. Instead, Thatcher whirled, burying his fist in the senior guard's stomach.

The senior guard gave a grunt but did not let go of his dagger; he was well trained indeed. Feeling the noose of time tightening on his throat, Thatcher sidestepped the dagger thrusting toward him, grabbed the guard's hair, and slammed the back of his head against the wall. The guard did not lose grip on the dagger, but this unexpected move – not listed in the normal arts of body battle – left him swinging his dagger futilely in the direction that any normal attacker would have taken. Thatcher slammed his head against the wall again, and again.

This was the dangerous moment. His back was now turned to the junior guard; if the junior guard had any training at all, he would use this moment to take out his whip and lash Thatcher into submission.

The junior guard did not do so. Instead, he wasted time by beginning to scream.

The senior guard made no noise. His eyes had rolled up in his head, and a moment later the dagger slipped from the senior guard's hand. Thatcher caught it as it fell. Released from his grip, the senior guard slid to the floor, his eyes closed and his head plastered with blood.

Thatcher turned to look at the junior guard, who was still screaming. The boy's scream cut off abruptly and his eyes widened as he looked at Thatcher, smiling with dagger in hand.

The cell door burst open two minutes later; a guard outside, alerted by the noises within the cell, had sent out a whistle of warning. By then, Thatcher was where he wanted to be: at the far end of the cell, with the boy pinned against his chest and the senior guard's dagger hard against the boy's throat.

The first man who arrived – a civilian, judging from his clothes – took one look at the situation and wisely backed out of the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at the crowd that was gathering behind him and barked something. Several guards who had begun to wriggle forward stopped in their tracks. There was a moment of indecision as the rescue party stared into the cell at the captor and his captive.

Thatcher was not surprised. He had heard in the army – who had not heard? – that the Eternal Dungeon had been leaderless for the past three years. Its High Seeker had gone mad and killed himself, or had been placed in a cell with strong bindings upon him – the rumors varied. All that was certain was that the High Seeker was no longer at his post. Which meant, Thatcher knew from his experience in the army, that no one here would be willing to take the chance of rescuing the hostage. No one would be so bold as to act without orders.

Thatcher's back was beginning to sweat; he had positioned himself against the wall of thick glass blocks that was next to a furnace. He raised his

voice to be heard above the shouts in the corridor, from guards who were just arriving. "I want to talk to one of your Seekers!" he called. "Your highest-ranked Seeker, whoever he may be."

The shouting continued. Thatcher could feel the junior guard shuddering against him; he was making small noises whenever Thatcher pushed the knife harder against his throat. Thatcher wondered whether he had drawn blood yet, but it hardly mattered. He had performed this maneuver enough times to know the difference between causing pain and draining life from a hostage. Not that the hostage ever survived this exercise, but death would come later, once Thatcher was sure of his freedom.

He keenly missed his men. They should be here now, ready to take the daggers and revolvers of the villagers who surrendered. He had worked out this plan long ago, on sleepless nights when he tried to think of more effective ways to fight the enemy. It was so simple: take one vulnerable hostage, and the rest of the village would surrender. And once the villagers had surrendered . . .

This time, he could not kill all the enemies standing before him; he lacked the support of his fellow soldiers. But he could ensure that the enemy did not kill him.

The shouting cut off, as abruptly as the junior guard's scream had. The crowd parted as cleanly as a head being severed from its neck. Through the crowd came two men.

Thatcher's eye was on the first man who entered the cell. He was a couple of decades older than Thatcher, in his late forties, and was dressed in the grey uniform of a guard. He was armed, but he was not touching his weapons, unlike most of the other men in the doorway, who were brandishing daggers and whips as though the mere sight of them would scare Thatcher into submission. This man scarcely looked at Thatcher. The moment he stepped over the threshold he turned his gaze to the man entering the cell behind him. The second man was dressed all in black and wore a hood.

"No weapons!" Thatcher said before the hooded man could speak. "Tell that guard of yours to strip himself, or else to leave the cell."

"As you wish, sir." The Seeker's voice was deep and courteous. His eyes were nearly hidden in the shadows of the hood's eye-holes. He was a tall man, but leanly built; Thatcher knew that he could overcome his opponent in any hand-to-hand fight. Not that it was likely to come to that. Already the Seeker was saying, "Mr. Sobel, disarm yourself, if you please."

The guard did so with eagerness. Thatcher found himself sighing inwardly, wondering whether anyone here would prove to be a worthy opponent. The Seeker's guard handed his dagger to his master, who reached back and handed it to the redheaded civilian standing amongst the guards crowding the doorway. Then the Seeker reached for the guard's whip.

The boy in Thatcher's arms made a sound in his throat, as though protesting this betrayal of his best interests. The Seeker, distracted as he was about to hand the whip back to the man at the door, paused and said in a loud voice, obviously meant to reach the far ends of the crowd, "Do not worry, Mr. Meakem! The prisoner will not harm you."

Thatcher felt laughter building in his belly. The Seeker, in taking the whip from his guard, had gripped it so that it was pointed backwards, useless in a fight. Now the Seeker was staring around the cell, obviously trying to assess whether anything here could prove to be of use to him during the coming battle.

All he found was the senior guard, still slumped to the ground about halfway down the cell. The Seeker took several steps forward in the direction of the unconscious figure, his anxiety causing him to forget about the captor and captive. "Mr. Urman . . ."

"Stay back!" cried Thatcher. The Seeker was still holding the whip backwards in his hand; Thatcher was less worried about this than by the fact that the Seeker's guard, like a shadow of his master, had followed the Seeker forward. That man, at least, had the sort of build that made him look as though he would be capable of winning a body battle.

"No further, unless you want his throat cut." Thatcher pressed his stolen dagger harder against the boy's throat and heard him whimper again.

The Seeker stopped dead in his tracks. "Sir," he said, "you already have one hostage; a second can be of no use to you. Please allow me to remove

Mr. Urman from this cell, so that he can be tended to."

Thatcher glanced at the slumped figure and made a quick calculation. He did not want the Seeker to think that he was careless of the welfare of hostages; then the Seeker might begin to guess how little chance there was that the boy in Thatcher's arms would survive this encounter. Besides, if the Seeker ordered his guard to remove the prisoner, Thatcher would have one less person in this cell to deal with. He jerked his head in agreement.

The Seeker immediately leaned forward and murmured something in the ear of his guard. The guard nodded, but to Thatcher's disappointment, the Seeker's guard simply beckoned forth from the doorway the redhead in civilian clothes. The redhead quickly hurried forward, keeping his gaze upon the injured figure. Thatcher held his breath – three men in the cell was two more than he wanted – but nothing happened except that the redhead scooped the injured figure into his arms and disappeared out the door with him. The crowd, now utterly silent, parted to let him through.

"All right," Thatcher said in a rough voice. "I've given you what you want; now let me tell you what you will do for me. You will give orders for my release. You will ensure that no one is in the corridor except yourself and that guard of yours. You will escort me and my hostage from the dungeon, not by way of the main entrance, but through the back entrance by which you receive deliveries—"

He felt laughter rumbling in his belly again at the expressions of the guards at the doorway. "Yes," he said, smiling, "I know more about this dungeon than you think—"

"I doubt that." The Seeker, whose voice till now had been tentative, abruptly turned cold. "If you knew anything about this dungeon—"

Thatcher was never able to figure out later how it happened. It was impossible; no man, holding a whip backwards, could have flung the lash forward with precision. But a moment later, Thatcher felt the sting of the lash upon his face, cutting into the side of his nose and narrowly missing his eye. With a cry, Thatcher began to raise his right hand to his nose. Then he remembered that his right hand held the dagger, and he reached down to return it to the boy's throat.

It was too late. The Seeker's guard, moving as fast as the lash, had sped forward and wrenched the boy out of Thatcher's grasp. Thatcher's dagger followed in the direction of the boy—

And in the next second the dagger fell to the floor, along with Thatcher's knees. He clutched his arm, wondering how it was that a single whiplash could feel so much like a bullet.

Above him, the Seeker said calmly, "If you knew anything about this dungeon, you would know that Seekers do not normally touch weapons, and when they do, they use them. —Mr. Meakem, are you well?"

"Yes, sir." The boy's voice was faint from the doorway, where the Seeker's guard had paused with him; he looked ready to pass out. "He didn't harm me, sir."

Thatcher took several deep breaths. He had endured worse wounds than this in the army, and he had killed men who inflicted such wounds. Before he could plan his next move, though, a figure burst through the doorway, shouting, "Bloody blades, man! Don't you give me enough work caring for the wounds of your tortured prisoners without supplying me with injured guards also?"

The Seeker did not turn his head to look at the new arrival. He was still gripping the whip backwards in an easy manner that Thatcher did not find reassuring.

"Good evening, Mr. Bergsen," he said in a cool manner. "Mr. Meakem may have need of your services, but I would ask that you tend to Mr. Urman first."

"I've just come from him." The healer's voice was grim.

"And how fares he?" The Seeker's voice was utterly level. He sounded as though he were discussing a change in daily rations.

There was a pause. The healer's face was bright red, though incongruously, his anger seemed aimed at the Seeker before him rather than at the prisoner who had scooped the dagger back into his hand and scrambled to his feet, trying to figure out how to attack the opponent before him.

Then the healer said flatly, "The same as the last guard who was attacked in this dungeon."

"I see." The levelness of the Seeker's voice did not change, though the healer's words had caused a murmur to ripple through the crowd.

"Well, sir," said the Seeker to Thatcher, in as cold a manner as before. "I fear that you have just shortened your chances that any magistrate will find you innocent of murder. I would invite you to look at Mr. Urman's body and see the results of your action, but somehow I doubt that you are the sort of man to be moved by images of death." And with another swift movement, too quick to be followed by the eye, he sent his whip lashing forward to encircle Thatcher's wrist. The dagger spun from Thatcher's hand, out of reach.

"Welcome to the Eternal Dungeon, Mr. Owen," the Seeker said. Thatcher, raising eyes that were now stinging with tears, took note of the glacial green eyes before him, and realized in that moment who his opponent was.

Then the mad High Seeker scooped Thatcher's dagger off the floor and turned away, and a moment later Thatcher was alone in his cell, with blood dripping from his wounds.

o—o—o

"Gerson has a lot to answer for," said Mr. Boyd.

They were sitting in the entry hall among the guards, whose chatter was more subdued than usual this afternoon. Even the lamps seemed dimmer than usual. The Eternal Dungeon's Codifier, whose phlegmatic exterior hid a fire that scorched any person unwise enough to draw near, glanced out of his doorway and beckoned the next in a line of guards waiting to offer their testimony as to what had caused so serious a breach in the dungeon's security.

Seward looked away. He had been the third man to give his witness, preceded only by Mr. Meakem and the High Seeker. Rumor held it that the Codifier had visited the prisoner first, to learn his perspective on the assault, but the prisoner had refused to speak to him.

"Nine guards," said Mr. Boyd, slamming down his pen with such force that ink spattered from its nib. "Mr. Meakem offered his resignation before the night was out."

"Perhaps it's just as well," said Seward. "By his own testimony, he showed poor judgment."

Mr. Boyd snorted. "He was only in his third week of training – how else can you expect a pup to act when threatened? I blame Mr. Urman. With four years' experience, he ought to have known better."

Seward said nothing, gathering together his papers into a pile. It was his written report of what had occurred, the first report he had composed on a prisoner for thirty-four months. He wished he could feel more satisfaction at the return to a familiar task.

Mr. Boyd said in a quieter voice, "I'm sorry. I forgot that you trained him."

Seward carefully screwed on the cap of his pen and said, without looking up, "In any case, this hardly seems the moment to be speaking ill words against him."

Mr. Boyd stayed silent. Seward raised his eyes high enough to see the door to the far right of the entry hall, the one that led past the doors to the Seekers' living quarters, then past a doorway leading to the outer portion of the dungeon, and finally ended in a black door likely to go unnoticed. That door led to the healer's office, which was adjoined by the crematorium. Every man, woman, and child who died in the Eternal Dungeon, or who died as the result of trial witness offered by the dungeon's Seekers, was buried in the crematorium's single pit, which seemed to extend to the center of the earth.

Seward wondered when the prayers for the latest dead man would begin. He turned his eyes away to the chair where Mr. Urman usually sat, and then turned again to Mr. Boyd, who was saying, "Did you hear that the Codifier has ordered that the prisoner be transferred to another Seeker? That's why I'm not on watch now. It's just as well – I spent all of last night in bed imagining different ways in which I could throttle Mr. Owen."

"Yes." Seward carefully gathered his papers together, as though the pile were not already neat enough. "I must go. I'm on duty soon."

"So?" Mr. Boyd eyed him curiously. "You'll be the same place I've been all day, doing documentwork here while this mess is worked out."

Seward shook his head. "The High Seeker has need of me. I'm guarding tonight."

It was a moment before Mr. Boyd understood; then his breath rushed in. He said slowly, "He must be mad."

Seward gave him a sharp warning look, and Mr. Boyd added hastily, "I mean the Codifier. He's the one in charge, in cases like this. How the bloody blades could he consider assigning a prisoner who made a murderous attack on a guard, to the Seeker whose guard was the victim?"

"I doubt he had any choice," Seward replied. "This is the first prisoner the High Seeker has asked to be assigned since his illness began. If the Codifier refused him, Mr. Smith might lose all confidence in himself."

"Confidence in himself." Mr. Boyd stared at Seward as though the madness had claimed a new victim. "The prisoner's best interests are what matters, not the Seeker's interests! You know that, the Codifier knows that – sweet blood, even the High Seeker knows that. I can't believe he would wander so far from his duty as to manipulate the Codifier into giving him this prisoner. It's deplorable! The High Seeker is—"

He stopped, though Seward had not shot him any looks. Perhaps his pause was simply due to the fact that Seward had not shown the sort of rage that any other senior guard might have done if his Seeker was attacked. Mr. Boyd was oddly considerate toward the guard who never raised his voice, never threatened violence, never used force of any sort – except when his duty required it of him.

Mr. Boyd glanced at the guards sitting nearby, who were beginning to take interest in the conversation. He lowered his voice and added, "It's not fair to you, Mr. Sobel. If anything goes wrong, you'll be the one who must deal with it. The High Seeker is endangering your life without need. You ought to tell him that."

"My job," said Seward quietly as he drew out his dagger, "is to endanger myself for the High Seeker. That's why I was assigned to him."

There was a long silence. Then Mr. Boyd said, "Very well – you, perhaps. But his other guards— Does he even have any other guards now?"

Seward nodded as he poked a hole into the corner of the pages with his dagger. "The Codifier has assigned Elsdon Taylor's day guards to the High Seeker, since Mr. Taylor is still in mourning."

"They have the easy job, guarding the prisoner when the High Seeker is off-duty. What about the junior night guard? Even under normal circumstances, I can't imagine that anyone would want Mr. Urman's job."

"No." He finished pulling a ribbon through the hole and raised his eyes to Mr. Boyd.

After a long while, Mr. Boyd said, "I can't be your first choice. How many other guards have you asked?"

Seward told him. He could hear some of the whispers at the adjoining tables, and he felt his hands tighten as he tied the knot in the ribbon holding together his report. The only mercy was that the High Seeker had retired to his bed for a brief rest before he began his searching of the prisoner. Though no doubt Layle Smith could guess what was being said. He knew well enough where his duty lay, and he would know how his actions would be regarded by others.

Mr. Boyd drummed his fingers on the wood of the table, cursed softly, and then looked up to say, "Well, it was a nice dream. Throttling the prisoner, I mean. I suppose, though, that he deserves a second chance." He stood up, and the screech of his chair legs rebounded off the cavern walls. "I'd better go arm myself."

Mr. Boyd turned away before Seward had time to ask him whether he believed that it was the prisoner who deserved a second chance, or the High Seeker.

CHAPTER THREE

When Thatcher Owen was seventeen years old, he visited a diviner. The diviner lived permanently in the dumping area near Thatcher's town; Thatcher ought to have guessed from that alone what he would see within the tent. As it was, he stood speechless for a moment, appalled at the diviner's surroundings.

"You could live better than this!" he cried.

The diviner was unmoved. "This is the fate that has been decreed for me," he replied. "I am content with what I have been given by the fates."

That was the moment when Thatcher first began to love the diviner. He was old for the type of adoration that boys often hold for their elders, but he had never known his father and had been searching all his life for a man to model himself after. Now, seeing the diviner's quiet contentment with his poverty, Thatcher knew that his search was over.

At the diviner's urging, he revealed why he had come: to resolve a conflict between himself and his grandmother, who was raising him. His grandmother wished him to take over the family business when he reached his adulthood; Thatcher wanted to become a soldier. He had decided to trust to the fates for the decision.

The diviner would not give him an immediate answer. "Never before have I been asked to prophesy how a man should lead his full life," he said. "I must pray upon this for several days before I give you answer."

If Thatcher's heart had not already been pledged to the diviner, it would have leapt to the diviner at the moment he said the word "man" rather than "boy." Thatcher returned to the tent the next day, not expecting to receive an answer yet, but only wishing to be in the presence of so wise and generous a man.

The diviner tolerated his presence. He more than tolerated it: he encouraged Thatcher to visit him, answering all his questions and listening to the boy tell of his troubles in reconciling his conscience with his sense of duty to his grandmother. "The fates have given you a hard road in life,"

the diviner said. "I can tell that, even without knowing yet what your life will be."

After a few days, the diviner gave the fates' answer, which was cryptic. "The fates say that they have a higher ambition for you than soldiering," he told the boy. "They have not yet said what it is. Perhaps they wish you to discover it for yourself."

It was a hard answer for Thatcher, who had long dreamt of being a soldier, but he accepted it, for love of the diviner. He came every day now, listening to the diviner's talk of the glorious old days when all in Yclau had followed the fates rather than try to determine their own fates in the foolish belief that such efforts could change their lives after death.

And so it went, all that long, lovely summer. Thatcher no longer dreamt of soldiering but of pleasing the diviner who had shown such affection to him. He was determined now to accept whatever life the fates decreed, so as to keep the diviner's love.

Then came the morning when his schoolmaster took ill and Thatcher arrived home from school earlier than usual. His hand was on the door-latch to the house when he heard a familiar voice within.

"It will not be long now," said the diviner. "I dared not proceed too quickly – he would have been suspicious if I had prophesied immediately a future in your family business. But his heart is mine now. He will do whatever I tell him the fates decree."

Thatcher stood up on tiptoe and peered through the door's window of colored glass, just in time to see his grandmother give the diviner a handful of bills. The diviner smiled.

And so Thatcher's life was indeed changed, but not in the way that either the diviner or the grandmother had anticipated.

o—o—o

"The fourth day of the second month of 359," said the High Seeker. "One of the border towns of our queendom was attacked by a Vovimian raiding party. A quarter of the men in the village were killed, three of whom were tortured before their death for information on where the Yclau village's

riches were located. A number of women were raped, and several more women were carried off as captives. The high command of the Queen's army, receiving news of the raid shortly after it took place, sent out orders that six units of Yclau soldiers were to be dispatched to pursue the raiders, recover the captive women and booty, and capture as many Vovimian soldiers as was possible. The six dispatched units soon lost the trail of the wily raiders, but a seventh unit, which had not been dispatched, followed the raiders doggedly."

He paused, as though expecting comment at this point, but none came, so he continued: "This is as far as the high command's own records go; the remainder of the report comes from the Yclau unit. Its lieutenant reports that the raiders were traced to a border town in Vovim, from which the soldiers in the raiding party evidently originated. The Vovimian soldiers immediately settled down to a night of celebration for their victory. The other villagers joined the celebration. During this time, the captive women were passed from man to man, undergoing rape at the hands of nearly all the village men. The women of the village held the captured Yclau down so that their men could assault the captives. All of this is reported by the lieutenant and is backed by the testimony of the lieutenant's men.

"In the early hours of the morning, when the sated captors had lapsed into drunken sleep, the Yclau unit attacked the village. The Yclau soldiers encountered greater resistance than they had expected, as every man, woman, and child in the village rose up to prevent the Yclau from saving the captives, who were sobbing in their cellar prison. The Yclau soldiers were forced to kill all the inhabitants of the village in order to save the women. Again, this is the lieutenant's report, and it is backed by his men. The captive women were unable to witness how the rescue took place, but they confirm the lieutenant's account of their rapes. The Vovimian army confirms that all the inhabitants of the village were killed. Although the death figures they give are higher than those supplied by the Yclau lieutenant, they concede that there is no sign that the village inhabitants were tortured or raped before their deaths."

The High Seeker looked up from the piece of paper he had been glancing at. Carefully folding it, he tucked it into his shirt pocket before adding, "A standard report from the present war. The only oddity about the Yclau

unit's behavior is the fact that the Vovimian men were not tortured, the Vovimian women were not raped, and the Vovimian women and children were killed. All three events are unusual in wartime. However, the raid might have been overlooked, if not for the fact that, in the past year, four other unauthorized raids took place, all by the same Yclau unit, and all of the same nature."

The High Seeker paused. His hood was licked with light from the flames beyond the glass blocks at the end of the prisoner's cell; his eyes alternated between gold and green as the fire danced in and out of them. His body was stiff, barely moving

He waited a minute. Then, when his recital received no response, he said, "Well?"

"It was defense," Thatcher replied in a bored voice.

He did not bother to say more. He had been over this ground dozens of times now; after each raid, he would be asked the same bloody questions, by the same chair-bound clerks who had never been on the field and who had no idea what conditions were like in battle. In their world of paper and pen and ink, two dozen Yclau soldiers politely asked two hundred Vovimian murderers and rapists to surrender the women they were brutalizing, and the Vovimians immediately handed over the captives. The idea that it might actually be necessary to shed blood in order to save abducted women had never occurred to these bladeless clerks. They were shocked at such an idea – so shocked as to recommend that the unit's lieutenant be placed under arrest and sent to the Eternal Dungeon.

The High Seeker said, "Even if it was defense, the unusual features of the raids remain. Why didn't you torture the men and rape the women? Few Yclau soldiers would have been able to resist the impulse to do so, under such circumstances."

Thatcher passed a hand over his mouth to hide his smile. He could well guess that the High Seeker would regard the lack of desire to torture as puzzling behavior. "There was no need. We were there to rescue the captives and recover the booty, nothing more. If we could have captured the responsible parties and handed them over to the high command for punishment, we would have done so. As it was, the only way to rescue the

captives was to kill the enemy. We were outnumbered ten to one; it was a miracle that we were able to save the women."

He allowed resentment to trickle into his voice. In a just world, an officer who managed to rescue captives against odds that high would be raised in rank, not handed over to torturers for questioning. But Thatcher had long known that no justice existed in the world. He was simply pleased that, when it had come to the test, his men had backed him with the truth. He hadn't been sure that they would; he'd encountered too many lies from them in the past.

"You admit that you ordered the death of all the village inhabitants during your five raids?"

"Of course I do," said Thatcher with a gesture of impatience. "I've always been honest in my reports. I don't lie."

The High Seeker's guard – the same man who had rescued the boy from Thatcher – flicked a glance toward Thatcher, and then returned his gaze to the High Seeker. The guard's eyes had remained fixed on his master since the moment that the High Seeker entered the cell. Thatcher had toyed during the intervening night and day with the idea of taking the High Seeker hostage, and his hopes had risen when the man was foolish enough to enter his cell unarmed. But the presence of the armed guard put an end to that plan. Instead, Thatcher must find a way to make the High Seeker see that he was innocent. And the odds against that, Thatcher knew, were even higher than the odds against a successful raid. He had heard too many tales about the High Seeker.

And now he knew that the tales were true. Thatcher cursed himself again as he remembered how the High Seeker and his guard had played him the fool on the previous day. Then he forced himself to pay attention to what the hooded man was saying.

"I am glad that you value honesty, Mr. Owen," said the High Seeker. "We esteem the truth in the Eternal Dungeon."

Thatcher wondered then whether the High Seeker was trained to torture prisoners through laughter. Thatcher ended up bent over double, clutching at his pained sides. "I – I see," he finally sputtered. "I've been searching

for honest men all my life. It never occurred to me to search among torturers."

The High Seeker ignored this comment. "So you commanded your men to kill the Vovimian villagers in defense. Including the villagers who weren't soldiers."

Thatcher sobered rapidly. "How do you know they weren't soldiers? Those cursed raiding parties don't dress in uniforms. For all we know, every man in that village had served his turn as a raider. They'd nearly all of them raped the women; they were all a threat."

"And the women of the village?" The High Seeker's voice was quiet.

"Helped their men. You've seen my report, High Seeker – you know that the women took up arms against us. Even the snake-tongued Vovimians don't deny that."

He wondered briefly whether this dagger-prick would arouse a reaction, but the High Seeker merely said, "And the children?"

Thatcher snorted. "'Children'? Some of those so-named children were nearly full-grown, and they'd already been trained in the blood-letting customs of the Vovimians. A Vovimian child with a weapon in his hands can be as dangerous as a full-grown man – you of all people should know that."

This time the guard flicked a glance at Thatcher, his brows drawn low, and Thatcher guessed that the dagger had penetrated that man's skin. But the High Seeker's voice continued to be flat as he said, "The youngest child you killed was barely out of her cradle."

Thatcher felt anger rush into him suddenly. It was always this way when he was questioned. The questions would start out calm and measured; only gradually would Thatcher realize that his questioner was twisting the truth, coming as near as he dared to an outright lie. "We esteem truth in the Eternal Dungeon" – oh, if it were only true. Thatcher thought that he would have been willing to pay any price asked by someone who was really honest with him.

But such a person did not exist, he reminded himself. He had learned that long ago.

"If I explained to you why that was defense also, you wouldn't understand," he replied in a rough voice. "I don't know why you're wasting your time with this game. You have a witness who can testify I killed your guard – and though that was defense as well, no doubt you can twist the truth to make the magistrate send me to the hangman. Then you can burn my body and fling my ashes into the gutter."

"We are somewhat more careful of our prisoners' ashes than that," the High Seeker said softly. "In any case, what took place in this dungeon will not be charged against you unless we are unable to obtain other confessions from you. We prefer not to give witness against prisoners in matters that concern ourselves."

Thatcher permitted himself to bark out a laugh. Of course the High Seeker would be eager to hide from the world the fact that his guards had bumbled the simple task of serving a prisoner his meal. And because of that, the High Seeker was determined to invent another crime for Thatcher to be hung for. Thatcher found himself wondering why the High Seeker did not simply forge a confession and claim it came from Thatcher.

But if he did, of course, he would not be able to torture Thatcher.

Thatcher felt a chill run through his body; then he resolutely thrust that thought aside. He had joined the army knowing that he would undergo pain and might undergo death, but he had been determined to save his Queen and his fellow countryfolk against the connivings of the vicious, lying Vovimians. It had not surprised him much to discover that lies abounded in the Yclau army as well, nor that he should find his life threatened by some of the very men he had been seeking to defend. That was what life was like. He had not expected it to be any different, not for many years.

But if he must be tortured and executed, he would at least hold to his principles, dying as a true man must. As a truthful man must.

He pulled himself upright and said, "Ask me whatever questions you want. You'll get nothing but honest replies from me, however much you'd like me to lie."

The High Seeker did not speak for a moment. Thatcher had been watching him closely since his arrival that evening, intently examining the man's body and eyes for signs of his rumored madness. The High Seeker did not seem in any way hysterical – in fact, he was much milder in manner than Thatcher had expected a Seeker to be. As the torturer spoke, his guard's expression would occasionally waver into brief frowns, as though the High Seeker was taking a path not expected.

Perhaps, then, the High Seeker *was* mad, but his madness had taken an uncommon form. If so, Thatcher could make use of this knowledge.

He decided to change his tactics. Emitting a hollow laugh, he said, "This is all a charade – having you of all people search me. Don't you think I've heard about you? I know why you've decided to question me yourself. You want to know whether I killed any of your kinfolk."

The High Seeker's voice was calm, measured. "As far as I know, Mr. Owen, I did not have any kinfolk in the villages you destroyed."

"But you could have had kin there, couldn't you? So this is your revenge: you can break my body in order to pay me back for what I did to the Vovimians."

"Can I?" The High Seeker's voice was utterly neutral. Thatcher felt himself itch with irritation. He had successfully used this tactic on all five raids – he had lured a young man into attacking him by taunting him, then had used the youth as a hostage to force the other villagers to surrender.

This time he doubted that he could lure the High Seeker into arm's reach. The man had taken care to place himself as far away from Thatcher as possible, and his guard was watching the proceedings with careful eyes. But if the High Seeker was really as unbalanced as Thatcher guessed, perhaps Thatcher could force him out of his abnormally calm state into whatever frenzy was hidden within him.

"You're just like the villagers I killed," Thatcher said in a voice heavy with mockery. "I've met men like you dozens of times on that side of the border. Cruel, callous— Oh, yes, callous," he said as though the High Seeker had spoken. "I can tell that just by our short acquaintance. Look at your companion!" Thatcher waved a hand toward the guard.

The High Seeker was too well trained to look. Thatcher forced himself to laugh again. "You don't even look at him. He hangs on your every word, probably follows you from room to room like a shadow – and what does he get in return? Nothing. You've probably never looked him straight in the eye the whole time he has worked for you. You barely remember that he exists."

"Mr. Sobel's duty is to watch me," said the High Seeker. "My duty is to watch the prisoner."

Thatcher's blood surged warm through his body. The High Seeker had responded to one of his challenges; it was like seeing an opponent stumble during a fight. He remembered his imaginings about entering into body battle with this man, and he envisioned the High Seeker pinned to the ground, struggling to rise . . .

"And do you care about any of the men who work for you?" asked Thatcher. "Did you care about the guard I killed? Did you instruct him on how to avoid death? If so, your training was poor. I wonder what he was thinking during his final moments of life? I'll bargain he was thinking of your betrayal – he was thinking of how he might have lived to old age, unbloodied, if you hadn't been so cold-hearted as to deny him the training he needed to survive."

He stopped only because he had run out of breath. There was no sign that the High Seeker was paying attention to his words. The man had not moved; his gaze had not faltered; his fists had not clenched.

But when he spoke, it was in a voice so soft that it was nearly lost by the faint sounds of the flames flickering behind Thatcher.

"Mr. Owen," the High Seeker said, "since you are evidently not in the mood to discuss the serious charges placed against you, I think it would be best if we continued this conversation tomorrow. Good evening."

The High Seeker turned his back. The door at the end of the cell was already opening; the redhead, now in the uniform of a guard, had his dagger out, and for a moment it looked as though he would enter the cell. Then he stepped out of the way, and the High Seeker disappeared into the

darkness of the corridor, while the first guard followed him as close as a shadow.

Thatcher grinned. In his mind, the High Seeker lay writhing on the ground, stunned into surrendering the first round.

o—o—o

"So who do you reckon you're guarding?" asked Mr. Boyd. "The High Seeker against the prisoner, or the prisoner against the High Seeker?"

Seward took out his dagger, held it a moment over Mr. Boyd's hands, and then deftly sliced the red ribbon that the other guard was holding for him. As Mr. Boyd laid aside the stack of documents they had just bound, Seward said, "It's the duty of every guard to protect prisoners against anyone who might break the *Code of Seeking*. Including a fellow guard."

Misunderstanding, Mr. Boyd snorted. "As though I could do any damage to the prisoner from behind a closed door. Mr. Sobel, I had my eye pressed to the watch-hole the whole time. The High Seeker nearly went for the prisoner's throat toward the end."

Seward shot him a dark look, jerking his head slightly toward the guards at the other end of their table in the entry hall. He and Mr. Boyd had been released early from their duty of guarding the prisoner's cell, for the day guards had arrived an hour before schedule. No doubt the day guards were driven by the same curiosity that held all of the workers in this dungeon captive: to know whether the High Seeker had attacked his prisoner yet.

Mr. Boyd looked properly rueful. He was not normally prone to gossip; the fact that he had spoken so loudly demonstrated how strong the tension was in the dungeon at the moment. Lowering his voice, Mr. Boyd said, "If you hadn't been there, he would have killed the prisoner. Or mutilated him. Or whatever it is he dreams of doing to prisoners."

Seward knew more than most of the dungeon's inhabitants did about what the High Seeker dreamed of doing to prisoners. He busied himself with tying another bundle of documents before saying, "You could say the same for me."

"Oh, Mr. Sobel." Mr. Boyd, who had been standing in order to place the documents in a storage box destined for the documents library, sighed as he sat down beside Seward at the table. "You don't think anyone could take you seriously when you say that, do you? Your record is spotless. Sweet blood, man, one has only to look at you to see how unlikely it is that you would break the Code! I've never met anyone so serene in disposition. You're like day to the High Seeker's night."

Seward said nothing, curling the ribbon into a perfect loop before tying it.

The other guard, watching him closely, said, "You're worried. You must be. You saw what I saw."

"What I saw," said Seward, carefully slicing the next ribbon, "was a Seeker doing his duty."

Mr. Boyd was silent for a long time after that, watching Seward neatly slice out lengths of ribbon for the coming bundles, each one exactly as long as the previous one. Finally the younger guard said, "He was right, you know."

"The High Seeker?"

"The prisoner. The High Seeker *doesn't* look straight at you, ever. I'd noticed that."

"It doesn't matter to me if he does," Seward said, leaning over to take another stack of papers and straighten its edges. "He's only a workmaster to me."

Mr. Boyd snorted again, and then lapsed into silence as another guard, wearing a black wrist-band in honor of Mr. Urman, sauntered over to ask, ever so casually, how matters were going with their prisoner.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thatcher had had a good day. He had gone to bed peacefully, with thoughts of his victory running through his mind, and had slept like a contented cat until evening, when the guards posted outside his cell during the daytime came in to bring him breakfast. His nights spent sleeping on foreign battlefields had not been this tranquil.

True, he had dreamt of the girl again. He was not sure why she kept turning up in his dreams. He supposed it was human nature to regret the unchangeable.

He had first noticed her as he and his men were making their sally. She was trying to hide under one of the outside trestle tables that the Yclau women had been raped upon. Thatcher had grinned at her in passing, an automatic reaction. His cousin had a daughter this age, of about three years. He had briefly wondered whether he should take this girl and the other little ones back over the border once this was through, so that they could be placed in the care of civilized parents. Then his mind had been occupied with killing the Yclau women's tormenters.

He had not expected his men to take so literally his command to kill all the village inhabitants. The past four villages they had attacked had been little more than gathering points for soldiers who wanted to live near the border: a few camp followers had dwelt there, as well as a few youths too eager to fight the Yclau to wait for the formality of reaching adulthood. No young children had lived there. Thatcher had taken it for granted that his men would have sense enough to leave alone the young children in this village.

By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late. He dared not reverse his order – he had seen for himself what happened when officers reversed orders in the midst of battle. He and his men were badly outnumbered here; he must not show any weakness by sparing Vovimians that his men were in the midst of killing. He needed to be a model for them of ruthless courage. And so he had stood by and watched as one of his men slit the girl's throat.

Well, that was war. Bad events happened all the time, events that could not have been reversed. It wasn't Thatcher's fault it had happened – it was the

fault of the Vovimian men in the village who had abducted the captives, as well as the women and youths who supported that abduction. The young children were the innocent victims of their cruelty, the sacrifice that Thatcher must make to obtain the Yclau women's freedom.

Not that Thatcher expected anyone outside the army to understand this. Especially not the man standing in front of him on that third day of Thatcher's imprisonment, staring coolly at him through the eye-holes of his hood.

Thatcher disliked hypocrisy almost as much as he disliked lies. That a man like this should presume to cast judgment over him for what he had done . . . He heard himself say, "I know why you became a Seeker. It's so that you could have the enjoyment of torturing prisoners."

For a moment, he thought the High Seeker would be too much a coward to respond to this attack. Then the High Seeker said softly, "That is not the only reason I became a Seeker, Mr. Owen."

Thatcher was temporarily disconcerted; he had not expected the High Seeker to be honest in his reply. Then he grimly smiled. Of course. The High Seeker was using the truth to hide some sort of lie. Probably his main reason for becoming a Seeker was even worse than the one Thatcher had guessed, and he was seeking to obscure this fact with apparent candidness.

"What are you thinking of?" the High Seeker asked.

Thatcher's smile spread at this admission from the High Seeker of his weak ability to see into the minds of prisoners. "Truth," he said. "Truth used to cover up lies."

He expected the High Seeker to question him about his response, but the hooded man merely said, "You seem to have a strong interest in honesty, Mr. Owen. Is that what you hoped to find in the Eternal Dungeon? Honest men?" His voice was light in a manner that Thatcher assumed denoted mockery.

Thatcher gave a short, humorless laugh. "Not bloody possible. I gave up my search for honest folk long ago, when I was a kid."

"Oh?" The High Seeker's voice was indifferent. Probably his mind was on which instrument of torture to use on Thatcher. "What made you decide this?"

It seemed as good a way as any to waste time till the real proceedings began, so Thatcher told the tale of the diviner. His feet hurt by the end of the story. One of the rules in this dungeon seemed to be that he was not allowed to sit down in his Seeker's presence. He hoped the High Seeker's feet hurt too; the man was too wary of him to seat himself on the bench. The guard who shadowed the High Seeker was standing too. Thatcher could not help but notice how the man's gaze kept wandering away from the High Seeker during Thatcher's recital, as though he found the prisoner more interesting than the man he was supposed to be guarding. Thatcher was not surprised. He too would become tired of the High Seeker's indifference toward others, if he were the guard.

At the end of the tale, Thatcher waited for the High Seeker to explain, as so many others had explained to Thatcher over the years, that his grandmother loved him and meant well and so he should forgive her for what she had done. Thatcher would sooner have wetted his grandmother's grave, but he had given up hope of making anyone understand the heinousness of the crime his grandmother had committed. No one in the world cared as much about honesty as Thatcher did – that had become clear long ago.

The High Seeker made no comment on the tale, though. All that he said was, "You appear to have a number of admirable qualities, Mr. Owen. You wish that honest people existed in this world, you desire to rescue abducted women, you do not seek to prolong the pain of those you kill, you endeavor on occasion to serve the Queen with loyalty—"

Thatcher had been on the alert for an insult from the moment that this false flattery began. Now he said quickly, "I've always served the Queen with loyalty."

"Have you?" The High Seeker's voice sounded more curious than challenging. "This is the Queen's dungeon, Mr. Owen, and we are the Queen's Seekers, appointed by the Crown to search prisoners who are placed in our care. Yet from the moment you arrived here, you have sought

to fight against the Seekers and their guards, perverting the process of justice ordained by the Queen you claim to serve."

Thatcher chewed that thought over for a minute. His immediate instinct was to make a stinging reply, but he prided himself on the fact that he was always willing to admit when he was wrong. Finally he said, "Very well, you have the right to search me – I'll concede that. But it won't do you any good. You want me to lie and say I was wrong to lead the rescue of those women. I'll never do that. I'll never tell you anything but the truth."

"Won't you?" Once again, the High Seeker's voice was light, as though he were chatting with an old friend. "It's rather late for you to make that decision, Mr. Owen. You have already told me several lies. Most of them I think you are genuinely not aware are lies, for which reason I will take no notice of those falsehoods. But one lie I believe you are very much aware that you told, and the manner in which you spoke the lie reveals that."

Thatcher did not even bother to ask which of his truths the High Seeker disbelieved. He simply snorted. "So you think I lied to you. Right, then. Do whatever it is you Seekers do when you're lied to."

"I very much regret it, Mr. Owen, but I fear that I must." The High Seeker's voice had turned soft. "The Code requires that punishment occur after any prisoner deliberately lies to his Seeker."

Thatcher felt his back grow stiff, and he cursed himself for showing that much weakness under the High Seeker's scrutiny. He had known that this would come – had known that the High Seeker would find an excuse to torture him. Now all he must do was endure the pain, until the High Seeker finally realized that no amount of pain would cause Thatcher to lie about what he had done.

The High Seeker had made no gesture that Thatcher could see, but the redheaded guard outside must have been listening at the keyhole, for he entered the cell, carefully locked the door behind him, and pulled out his whip from where it hung looped on his belt. Thatcher did not like the look in the guard's eyes. He had seen that sort of look in the eyes of Vovimians who, in the moment of their charge, wished not only to shoot but also to disembowel with their bayonets. The first guard, the one who shadowed the High Seeker, was far more reassuring; his expression was bland and

businesslike. Thatcher turned his attention back to the High Seeker, to see whether he could read anything in the man's eyes.

He was just in time to see the High Seeker begin to remove his shirt.

"What the bloody blades are you doing?" Thatcher was disconcerted. It was not as though he had been unaware of the possibility of this type of attack – he had heard rumors about where the High Seeker's tastes lay. But he would have expected the High Seeker to be more subtle – to send away witnesses before he began proceedings.

The High Seeker did not pause. He completed untying the fastenings on his shirt and handed the shirt to his first guard, who was frozen like a statue. Out of the corner of his eye, Thatcher could see that the redhead had likewise gone completely still. If this had happened before, the High Seeker was apparently not in the habit of allowing his guards to watch.

Thatcher's rapist – Thatcher could think of him in no other way now – walked toward him. He said, "I am preparing, Mr. Owen, for the punishment."

Thatcher thought this was the most unnecessary speech he had ever heard in his life. He braced himself for the fight to come. The High Seeker might have the right to search him, but Thatcher would sooner have given up his right of rebirth than to endure this particular punishment passively.

He was disconcerted once more as the High Seeker walked past him. The High Seeker stepped over to the far wall and stood facing it; he did not turn. Instead, he raised his arms high over his head. Thatcher was still trying to form theories as to this strange position for an attack when he noticed that the High Seeker was touching a ring that was inset into the wall.

"Mr. Sobel," the High Seeker said in a matter-of-fact manner.

The first guard broke out of his paralysis. He placed the shirt aside on Thatcher's sleeping bench, and then came forward, pulling something from his pocket. Thatcher had time enough to see that it was a set of keys before the guard reached up and inserted one of the keys into the wall, just above the ring. There was a click, and the bottom of the ring sprang out a couple

of inches from its flush position. It now looked like any other whipping ring Thatcher had seen in his years in the army.

Thatcher was slowly figuring out the reason why the ring was normally kept stored within the wall, and was grudgingly admiring the Seekers for their care in preventing prisoners from having a means to hang themselves. Thus he missed the moment when the guard began to bind the High Seeker's wrists to the ring with a leather strap he had taken from his pocket.

"Mr. Boyd," the High Seeker said, as though following normal routine.

The redhead looked as though he regarded this exercise as anything but routine; his face had taken on a look of horror. "Sir, no!" he protested as the other guard completed his handiwork. "I couldn't possibly—"

"With your permission, sir, I will do it." The first guard stepped forward and took the whip from the redhead's grasp. The redhead's expression changed from horror to incredulity.

"Thank you, Mr. Sobel. I know that I can count on you to apply the lashes in the proper manner." The High Seeker's voice was partly muffled by his arms, which now cradled his face. "Mr. Owen, I would like to speak with you first."

Thatcher moved warily toward the far end of the cell. His eye was on the guards rather than the High Seeker. The redhead was now looking over his shoulder, as though trying to decide whether to call for help. The first guard was trying to school his expression, but he was not successful at hiding the grim line of his lips. Thatcher had seen that look before, on the faces of men in the field hospital who were awaiting the moment when their legs would be sawed off.

Either he had stumbled across the finest actors outside of Vovim, Thatcher decided, or the High Seeker was trying something new and different.

He could not have guessed this from the High Seeker's eyes, which appeared just as calm as before. He could see them now, standing as he was along the warm wall, with the furnace fire beyond it touching flames against the frosty glass. The heat made sweat break out on Thatcher, but

the High Seeker looked as cool and collected as though he were on a picnic at the seaside.

"The Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking* requires different levels of punishment, Mr. Owen," he said in a conversational manner. "Five to twenty light lashes are prescribed for minor offenses, in cases where the prisoner has not previously received punishment by those in authority over him, such as prison workers or army officials. Twenty to forty medium lashes are prescribed in cases of minor offences where the prisoner has previously received beatings by order of authorities. Forty to sixty hard lashes are prescribed in cases of major offences. Major offences are defined by the Code as physical attacks upon a Seeker or trying to shift the blame for one's crime onto an innocent party. Mr. Sobel, what is the appropriate punishment in a case like this?"

There was the barest of hesitations before the guard replied, in an even voice, "Light lashes, sir."

"Mr. Sobel." The High Seeker did not raise his voice or turn his head to look at the guard, but something changed in his tone that made Thatcher's flesh prickle.

"I'm sorry, sir," the guard said quickly. "Medium lashes are the appropriate punishment in this case."

"Indeed," said the High Seeker, "since both you and I have received beatings on the order of authorities, Mr. Owen."

Thatcher did not need anyone to tell him what he had received in his past, but he stepped back a bit to look curiously at the High Seeker's back. Sure enough, though the back was in shadow, Thatcher could see scar marks. They were old and faded, which was why he had not noticed them before.

"Twenty to forty lashes," the High Seeker said. "The Seeker receives the right to choose the number of lashes, based on his assessment of the prisoner's character and the circumstances of the prisoner's offence. How many lashes do you believe I should receive, Mr. Owen?"

"Forty," he replied swiftly. He knew, even as he spoke, that he had fallen into the High Seeker's trap. He had figured out by now the point of this

exercise. The High Seeker would allow a few light lashes to land harmlessly on his back, would writhe and scream for the benefit of his audience, and then, when his prisoner had begun to fear the power of the lash, would order that Thatcher receive the remainder of his self-imposed sentence, delivered at full force. It was the sort of trick Thatcher had come to expect from this man.

Still, he could not resist requesting the highest number of lashes. Despite what the army clerks might think, he was no sadist – as the High Seeker had rightly said, he had no desire to see others linger in pain, no matter how much they deserved it. Because of this, he had found ways to keep control of his wayward men without need for ordering any lashings.

He had not been so lucky during his own time as a bottom-ranked soldier. Two weeks in the army, and a trip to the whipping post, had convinced Thatcher that, if he truly wanted to serve the Queen, he would do better to bide his time until he became an officer and could take action on his own initiative. He could still remember the bite of the nine-tail upon his shoulder-blades and his resolute determination to make no sound during the beating. He considered his ability to keep that promise one of the crowning accomplishments of his life.

And now his torturer, the man who would order Thatcher's renewed pain, stood bound before him. Yes, Thatcher would like the High Seeker to feel the taste of leather upon his body again, even if the beating was kept light.

Thatcher switched his attention to the whip in the guard's hand. It was a single-tail, with no handle that Thatcher could see, but it tapered to its tip, becoming wonderfully thin toward the end. It was much shorter than Thatcher had imagined it would be, no doubt to take into account the narrow confines of the cell. He wondered whether he could hope that the guard, in his evident state of nerves, would make a costly error in beating his Seeker.

"Mr. Owen," said the High Seeker, "it is the duty of the Seeker supervising the punishment to stand next to the prisoner and watch him closely as the beating proceeds, so that he can stop matters if it appears that his prisoner's health is in grave danger."

Thatcher returned to his previous position along the wall, his face touched by a smile of light irony. He had every intention of watching the High Seeker's eyes as the first blow landed.

"Are you ready, Mr. Sobel?" the High Seeker asked. He was making no effort to hide his eyes from Thatcher – on the contrary, his gaze was fixed with his prisoner's.

"Yes, sir." The guard holding the whip sounded as though he were anything but ready. The redhead seemed to have given up thought of seeking rescue from other quarters; he was standing with his fists clenched, glaring at Thatcher.

"One," said the High Seeker.

It took Thatcher a moment to realize this was a signal, and by that time the lash had landed. There was no dramatic whistling through the air or cracking, just a soft thud. "Hold a minute!" Thatcher said and put up his hand. The guard with the whip was watching the High Seeker rather than Thatcher, but he made no move to land the second blow, apparently still awaiting the High Seeker's signal.

Thatcher came round to the High Seeker's back. He was vaguely surprised to see a red line there. He ran his finger along it. The blood that had been released under the skin was already beginning to swell into a welt. The lash had been landed carefully, though – there was no cut in the skin along the line.

Thatcher snorted. "Is this what you call a medium beating?"

"Yes, it is, you bloodthirsty pig!" replied the redhead with raised voice. "What are you hoping for, gallons of blood?"

"Mr. Boyd," the High Seeker said quietly, once again with that edge which made Thatcher's skin prickle. "If you cannot behave yourself, I will have to ask you to leave. Mr. Owen, the beating will grow more intense as it progresses. May I continue with the punishment?"

"Continue away," said Thatcher, feeling as though he were watching a particularly entertaining puppet show. He returned to his previous place and smiled smugly at the High Seeker.

At the third lash, the High Seeker grunted. Thatcher chuckled at this; evidently the High Seeker was not as skilled as he was at keeping from making noises during punishment. He would have thought the grunt was faked, but the angry red welts were continuing to appear on the High Seeker's back. Thatcher wondered whether the guard administering the punishment would receive his own beating later, for having lost control of his whip.

At the twelfth lash, the High Seeker let out a howl. Thatcher was standing close to him in order to watch the eyes, which were now blinking rapidly; he was nearly scared into rebirth by the raw sound that arose from the High Seeker's throat. The two guards jumped in their places, and the guard with the whip blanched. But he continued to apply the blows, red stripes along the bare back, as the redhead began muttering what sounded suspiciously to Thatcher like death threats.

There were no more howls, but the grunts continued. By the eighteenth lash, the High Seeker appeared to be trying to climb the wall, standing on his toes and clutching at the ring. Thatcher, who remembered doing the same during his own beating, gave another soft chuckle.

The High Seeker fainted at the twenty-fifth blow. Thatcher waited to see whether the guards would throw ice water on the bound man or whatever else was usual in this case, but the guard with the whip simply reached into his pocket again and brought out a small vial, which he uncorked and placed under the hood of the High Seeker, hanging limply in his bonds. The vial did its work at reviving the bound man, and the beating continued.

It was obvious to Thatcher by now that the High Seeker, overcome by the unexpectedly harsh beating, had completely forgotten to give the order for his own release. The guards were clearly unwilling to act without that order. Thatcher, feeling a mixture of bemusement and delight, watched as the second fainting occurred at the thirty-second lash. From that point on, the High Seeker no longer had the strength to call out the numbers of his own beating. Thatcher did so for him, spacing the lashes wide, so that the High Seeker would feel the full impact of each blow. The High Seeker's eyes were squeezed shut now.

Thatcher had to admit that the guard with the whip was skilled. Apparently the guard's only problem was in landing a blow softly; he had no trouble controlling the direction of the whip. The High Seeker's back was now neatly ridged with parallel lines, none crossing the other; but with forty lashes ordered, it was only a matter of time before the lash-marks kissed each other. The blood began to trickle down the High Seeker's sweat-laden back at the thirty-sixth blow.

After the fortieth lash, the High Seeker was barely conscious, so he missed the opportunity to give Thatcher whatever speech he had intended to deliver about how Thatcher would receive worse if he continued in his obstinacy. Thatcher watched the guards help the High Seeker stumble from the cell, without making any commentary of his own.

He hardly felt it was necessary. In his mind, the High Seeker lay panting on the ground, defeated for a second time.

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"He's mad!" hissed Mr. Boyd.

"Who, the Codifier?" Seward, on the point of pushing a documents box onto the topmost shelf of the documents library, looked down at Mr. Boyd, who was standing below him.

The other guard frowned. He had been unwilling to enter the dimly lit room in the first place, complaining that he was already close to blindness from the eyestrain of working in the other dim rooms of the dungeon. But Seward, guessing what the nature of this conversation would be, wanted them alone in a room with the door shut.

Now Seward returned his attention to the box, saying, "There's nothing in the *Code of Seeking* that forbids a Seeker from taking punishment in place of a prisoner."

When he looked down again, he saw that Mr. Boyd was gaping as though he were locked in a room with a madman. Seward made his way back down the steps of the sliding ladder that could be placed against any of the three walls of the library. "'A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners,'" he reminded Mr. Boyd.

The other guard's face darkened upon hearing the most famous words in the *Code of Seeking*. "A Seeker must be willing to suffer *if* it's in the best interests of the prisoner for him to do so. How is this supposed to help the prisoner? Will it make him cry and say, 'I'm so sorry – I was such a terrible man for making you and my victims suffer'? Mr. Sobel, you know better than that!"

Seward said nothing. His shoulders ached from the past half hour of lifting boxes, and his eyes were watering; the dungeon's Record-keeper only permitted one safety lamp in this room. It was part of what he missed most about the world above: bright light. Everything was bright in the world he had left behind, while everything in this dungeon was various shades of grey, if not entirely black. . . .

"Mr. Sobel." Mr. Boyd seemed to be struggling to keep his voice under control. "You must see what's happening. From the very start, he's been unbalanced. No, listen!" He raised his hand, as though Seward had been about to interrupt. "He's treating this prisoner as cooperative – doesn't that tell you anything?"

Seward did not reply. This had been bothering him too, from the first hour of searching. The *Code of Seeking* had strict rules on how to proceed with prisoners, and one of its strictest rules was that cooperative prisoners should be treated with relative gentleness, while uncooperative prisoners should be treated with harshness and frightened into giving confessions.

The High Seeker certainly did not lack skill in frightening prisoners. Nor could he be unaware of the rule requiring that cooperative and uncooperative prisoners be treated differently: he had written the rule himself. From the moment that Seward had accompanied Layle Smith to the High Seeker's first searching since his madness, the guard had tensed himself in anticipation of the inevitable moment when the prisoner's defiance would bring out the High Seeker's dark skill at breaking prisoners through terror.

And the moment had passed. Mr. Owen had rejected, had defied, had jeered, and Layle Smith had let it all go as though he were dealing with a prisoner quivering with fear and pleading to give his side of the story.

At first, Seward had thought he had simply missed the signal. The signs of a cooperative prisoner were various: the prisoner could indicate through word or sign that he was willing to answer the Seeker's questions; he could make clear that, if certain conditions were met, he would make his confession; he could plead innocence in such a manner that his Seeker was convinced by his testimony. Any one of these signals would be enough to require a Seeker to coax the prisoner rather than bear down upon him. But if no such sign appeared . . .

"He's treating an uncooperative prisoner as though he were cooperative," said Mr. Boyd. "He's breaking the Code. And he's letting himself be beaten in the prisoner's place, without there existing any chance that the prisoner will offer a confession as a result of the beating. The High Seeker said so himself on the first day: this prisoner isn't the type to be moved by images of death. Nor will he be moved by images of torture. The High Seeker has gone out of bounds, Mr. Sobel, and by the time he realizes how far his madness has taken him, it will be too late. We'll have lost all chance of extracting a confession from the prisoner. Or of helping the prisoner to his rebirth," he added belatedly.

Seward moved the ladder further along the railing that it was attached to, reached up to flip the latch locking the ladder in place, and began climbing up the rungs once more. "If you believe that Mr. Smith has broken the Code, it's your duty to report him to the Codifier," he told the younger guard.

"And will you back me?" Mr. Boyd asked. "Will you tell the Codifier that he should assign someone else to the prisoner?"

Seward shook his head. Below him, a soft stream of cursing began; then it stopped abruptly. He felt a nudge at his knees and looked down to see Mr. Boyd holding a box up toward him.

The other guard waited until the documents were safely on the shelf before he told Seward quietly, "You're the one who's in the cell with him. You're the one who will have to fight him if he breaks completely. And you know what that means."

Seward felt the box shake in his hands. He gripped the ladder tightly, waiting for the tremor to pass, and then raised the box above his head.

Below him, Mr. Boyd said even more quietly, "If this ends the way I think it will end, I'll sing your prayers. I vow this."

Seward nodded in acknowledgment of the gift, and then leaned on the ladder, resting his sweat-smeared brow upon his forearm.

CHAPTER FIVE

"At the seventh level, the prisoner's difficulty in breathing will increase," said the High Seeker. "He will feel as though a heavy stone is crushing him. The pain will not be confined to his chest, however. Because these new racks are designed to pull from both ends, the pain will be distributed throughout the body. Some prisoners state that the back muscles undergo the greatest agony; such reactions vary from individual to individual. In actual fact, the extremities of the body will be in greatest danger. The prisoner may feel as though blood is spurting through the pores of his fingers. This is an illusion, however. Blood does not begin to pour from the prisoner's body until a higher level, when the sinews snap and the limb-bones are wrenched from their sockets. At that level, lifelong crippling is a certainty and death a distinct possibility—"

"So?" said Thatcher brusquely. "It won't be me that's on the rack."

He was resisting the urge to hug his chest with his arms. The High Seeker's description was not what had prompted this impulse; Thatcher was simply cold. He had assumed that the furnace behind the glass blocks of his cell extended to other parts of the dungeon, but here in the rack room, all the walls were solid stone and the temperature was as crisp as late autumn. Needless to say, no one had offered him a cloak.

The High Seeker turned his head toward Thatcher. It was impossible to tell what lay in the man's expression; the room was nearly pitch dark, lit only by a bracketed lamp that glittered upon instruments hanging from the walls, curved in deadly shapes. Thatcher wondered with grim satisfaction whether he would be allowed to use these on the High Seeker as well.

The High Seeker said softly, "You will be in charge of this racking, as a Seeker is, Mr. Owen. It is important that you understand the stages leading up to a prisoner's breaking."

Thatcher waved his hand as though he were a Seeker graciously allowing a prisoner the opportunity to ramble on about irrelevancies. The High Seeker did not continue to describe the higher levels of the rack, though. Instead, he asked, "Did you ever play Scare when you were a boy?"

Thatcher narrowed his eyes, trying to determine whether the High Seeker was mocking him. "Many times. I always won."

"Then you should enjoy tonight's session. You and I are going to play Scare, Mr. Owen. We are going to see who breaks first: the man being racked, or the man ordering the racking. It is just past dusk now, and we will be together until the end of the night shift. If you decide before dawn arrives that you do not wish to rack me any more, I will have won the Scare. If, on the other hand, I break, either by word or by body, you will have won the Scare."

Thatcher's eyes remained narrow. "And what do I lose if I lose this game?"

"Nothing, Mr. Owen. The Code does not require you to play this game, and if you lose, you will forfeit nothing. If I lose, I forfeit the right to search you further, unless you indicate that you wish to speak further with me."

Thatcher chewed on his lip, trying to consider what truth lay behind the High Seeker's lies. It could be, of course, that the High Seeker was taking a genuine gamble. After all, the man had little to lose: once his searching was completed, Thatcher would be turned over to a magistrate and hanged for his killing of the guard. Probably the High Seeker considered that result a satisfactory enough ending to the game to be willing to forfeit his right to torture Thatcher if he lost.

On the other hand, the High Seeker could be lying. He could be having Thatcher rack him for some other reason. To scare Thatcher with a demonstration of the rack, perhaps? No, that theory held no truth – the High Seeker had already been tortured once, and he knew that Thatcher would not break from witnessing torture upon another man. More likely the High Seeker was trying to make Thatcher feel pity for his prisoner. Thatcher snorted at the thought.

"Do we have a deal?" the High Seeker asked, as though he had been following Thatcher's thoughts.

As if Thatcher had any bloody choice in the matter. "Deal," said Thatcher firmly. "I'll play Scare to you. Tell me, though – what do you consider counts as a breaking by word?" To see the High Seeker rent asunder on this

own machine would be sweet, but Thatcher was willing to win by any means.

The High Seeker nodded as though he approved of the question. He was standing a goodly distance from Thatcher, near the bottom of the rack, which forced Thatcher to turn his back on the guards. Thatcher did not like that, even though the High Seeker had sent the most dangerous guard, the redhead, outside to watch the door. The other guard, the one who always kept his eye on the High Seeker, was positioned like a captain at the wheel of the rack. When Thatcher had last looked at him, the guard's gaze had been firmly fixed upon the High Seeker.

"There are two ways in which a prisoner may break," the High Seeker said, trailing his fingers lightly over the wooden edge of the rack-bed. "He may indicate to his Seeker that he wishes to have the torture end. If he does so, this is taken as indication that he will cooperate with his Seeker – perhaps not through an immediate confession, but at least through a willingness to cooperate in the searching. The second means by which a prisoner may break by word is by telling the truth that he has previously lied to. In most cases, this means confessing to his crime."

Thatcher snorted again. "I don't suppose you have any crimes you want to confess to me."

"None that I want to confess to you, no," the High Seeker replied coolly, as though he could have produced a dozen murders for Thatcher if the circumstances had been right. "Therefore your job will be to uncover the truth I have not told you."

Thatcher felt a hard thumping vibrate through his body, like a triumphant cannon-shot near the end of war. "So you admit you've lied to me."

"Lied? No. But I have misled you."

Thatcher sighed at this word-mincing. It was like listening to a thief say, "I did not steal; I merely borrowed." Thatcher asked, "How did you *mislead* me, then?"

The High Seeker replied, "In the first words I spoke to you when I searched you, I gave you information that was true in a legal sense – I

could show you papers that prove the legal truth of what I said. Nonetheless, my words did not represent the full truth. They were a misleading I have made many times, to many people."

Thatcher took a step back so that he could glance over and see how the guard at the wheel was taking all this. The guard was doing a good job of pretending to be indifferent to the conversation, but Thatcher thought he could see a slight crease of puzzlement in the guard's brow.

Which could mean anything. Thatcher decided the topic was worth exploring. "So what truth am I supposed to discover?" he asked.

The High Seeker's voice was very soft when he replied. "My true name."

Thatcher heard the faint gasp even before he turned his head and saw that the guard was gripping the wheel hard, his lips slightly parted. So this was something the guard had not known before. But judging from his reaction, the guard believed the High Seeker's words.

Thatcher felt pure pleasure enter him then, as when he had killed the last inhabitant of the final village he had attacked and had known he could now release the terrified Yclau women from their chains. Whether or not the rest of this was a trick, it would be fun to see whether he could force the High Seeker to reveal something he had not even told his own guard. Perhaps there was a story attached to the name, a bloody story that the High Seeker did not want revealed, lest it show how little qualified he was to run this dungeon. And if Thatcher could make the High Seeker speak that story, in the presence of a witness . . .

Thatcher laughed aloud. "Right," he said. "Let's get started."

Several minutes passed before the High Seeker was secured to the rack, mainly because Thatcher stopped the procedure to argue that his prisoner should be racked naked. The High Seeker had not replied; he had simply turned his gaze to the guard, who had told Thatcher stiffly, "The Code does not permit prisoners to be stripped naked."

Thatcher was tempted to ask to see the exact passage in the Seekers' little devotional book, but he did not want to appear a fool. He already felt out of his depth. Beatings he had seen before, but the only place in Yclau

where rackings occurred was in this dungeon. He was supposed to supervise a racking without knowing how to do so.

"How long?" he asked, glancing at the water-clock that he could faintly hear dripping in the corner. He wondered whether the clock was an affectation of the Seekers; he had never seen one outside of a museum. It fit well, though, with the old instruments of torture on the wall.

"This is spring, so the dawn shift will arrive in a little under twelve hours," the High Seeker replied, now lying on the rack and acting as though he did not notice that the guard was binding his hands into straps above his head. "Rackings are permitted to last no more than twelve hours in each twenty-four hour period. They may be much shorter, of course, if the prisoner breaks or if the Seeker judges that it is not wise to continue the torture."

Thatcher ignored the second proviso. "How high can I take you? To the top?" He glanced at the dial on the wheel. It travelled a third of the way round the wheel and was marked from zero to ten, with quarter-marks in between the numbers.

"Not immediately," the High Seeker replied, pausing to suck in his breath as the guard tightened a strap around his middle. "The Code only permits the Seeker to raise the level if the prisoner lies in response to a question concerning his crime. Furthermore, the Seeker may only question the prisoner directly concerning his crime once an hour. This is to prevent the torture from proceeding too quickly, thus placing the prisoner's life in danger."

Thatcher wondered whether the High Seeker was making this all up on the spot. It seemed an unlikely way for torturers to proceed. "What do we talk about in between, then?" he asked with heavy sarcasm. "Hopscotch strategy?"

"Indirect questions are permitted, Mr. Owen. You may question me on any matter that you believe pertains to my true name, provided that you only ask what my name is once per hour. In general, Seekers try to wear down prisoners by asking the prisoners questions that cause them internal pain at the same time that external pain is being applied. When the prisoner can no longer stand the pain, he will break."

This seemed a more likely story. "And once an hour I can raise you a level? Is that it?"

The guard, who had been fastening straps around the High Seeker's ankles, spoke suddenly. "Seekers aren't permitted to raise prisoners more than a quarter level each hour except with the High Seeker's permission."

Thatcher glanced at the wheel and made a quick calculation in his head. A quarter level each hour for twelve hours – that would take the High Seeker no higher than level three. He grimaced. He might have guessed the High Seeker would win the game through cheating.

But even as he thought that, the High Seeker said, "You have my permission, Mr. Owen, to raise me one level each hour, until you reach ten."

Thatcher did not bother to make calculations this time; he could feel a smile sliding onto his face. The High Seeker, who was still acting though he were atop a feather mattress rather than being trussed to a rack, added, "You should know, Mr. Owen, that the stress the prisoner undergoes is a product of the level of the rack multiplied by the amount of time spent on the rack." Thatcher's face must have gone blank, for the High Seeker added, "If you place me on the rack at level three for one hour, the pain I undergo will be three times as much as if you placed me at level one for one hour. Likewise, if you place me at level three for two hours, the pain will be six times as intense as if I spent one hour at level one."

Even with his poor mathematical skills, Thatcher could figure out the rest. A grin spread across his face. By the tenth hour, he would have the High Seeker enduring pain ten times as great as he had during the first hour. And if Thatcher added in the pain from all the previous levels . . .

This would work. It was bound to work. Because, even if the High Seeker turned out to be a Vovimian god in disguise, refusing to tell the truth under the intense pain Thatcher placed him under, his body would still break. The High Seeker had admitted that already. Thatcher wished now that he had not cut off the High Seeker's recital of levels. When would the High Seeker's body be torn in two? At level eight? Nine? Would Thatcher have to wait until level ten? In any case, the High Seeker's doom was certain.

One way or another, he would break, and Thatcher, once more, would be the victor in the field.

He turned his grin on the guard, who was now standing stiffly at the wheel. "Take my prisoner up to level one," he ordered. "I want to hear him scream."

By the end of the fourth hour, the room was nearly black. The candle guttered, causing alternate periods of darkness and dimness. The sound of the dripping water-clock was obscured by the sound of heavy breathing.

Between one hoarse gasp and the next, the High Seeker said, "Five."

Thatcher did not need to be told; he could see that the water had reached the next line. He admitted to himself that he was envious of the High Seeker's ability to tell time without being able to see a clock, but he suspected that the High Seeker's habit of announcing each level as it arrived was simply a way for the man to continue to maintain control over the proceedings.

Thatcher hardly needed help with that. He was growing frustrated by his inability to ask the High Seeker the right questions. He had started by asking the obvious questions: Was the High Seeker a spy? Did he work for the King of Vovim? Had he committed any deeds for which he could be arrested? The High Seeker had answered each question in the negative. No doubt he was lying, but Thatcher could not think of any way to prove this. What was worse, the High Seeker seemed undisturbed by the questions. At times, Thatcher could almost imagine he heard a smile in the High Seeker's voice.

Thatcher leaned forward, trying to sight the High Seeker's eyes. They were still impossible to see. "You say you don't work for the Vovimian King," he said. "Does any of your family work for the King?"

"My father did, before his death."

Thatcher felt a rush of excitement enter him. He was getting closer to the truth. "What work did your father do?"

"He was a soldier. He fought in the wars against Yclau."

Better and better. "As an officer?" An officer was responsible, not only for his own deeds, but for any deeds he ordered his men to do. Thatcher had reason to know that.

"No. He was a bottom-ranked soldier."

Thatcher chewed on his lip a moment, trying to figure out how to turn this answer to his advantage. Finally he asked, "What about your mother? Did she work for the King?"

"My mother was from this queendom. My father abducted her and brought her back over the border."

Thatcher regretted the question. That the High Seeker's mother had been Yclau and was a victim of rape did not fit with the sort of portrait he was trying to build. He tried again. "You're like your father, I suppose."

"I was told when I was young that I resembled him."

"In more than face, I'll wager," said Thatcher quickly. "You've raped someone, haven't you?"

"Yes."

Thatcher felt triumph hammer at him. He looked quickly over at the guard, but to his great disappointment, the guard appeared unsurprised by this revelation. The crime had happened since the High Seeker came to the Eternal Dungeon, then. Probably the High Seeker had raped a prisoner – more than one prisoner, perhaps. That would not fit with what the High Seeker had said earlier about committing no deeds for which he could be arrested, unless . . . Yes, it would fit if the Queen permitted her Seekers to rape prisoners. And that seemed all too likely.

Thatcher thought glumly to himself that he was unlikely to rake up anything from the past that would destroy the High Seeker's career. Probably a criminal career was a prerequisite to becoming a torturer. Still, the High Seeker must be sensitive about his true name, or he would not have hidden it from people in this dungeon. Thatcher opened his mouth to ask the most important question.

At that moment, though, the guard reached over and slid his hand under the High Seeker's hood. Thatcher felt irritation enter him. The guard kept stopping to check heartbeats and measure breaths and wipe sweat off the High Seeker. It was as though he were a healer tending a patient rather than a guard helping to rack a prisoner. Thatcher was quite sure that no other prisoner was cared for this tenderly, and he opened his mouth to say so.

But the guard had slipped away from the wheel. Turning his eyes from the High Seeker for the first time, the guard went over and placed a fresh candle in the lamp, lighting it from the old candle. Then he knelt down beside the tank where the overflow of water from the clock drained. Thatcher craned his neck, trying to see whether the guard was tampering with the clock to make it run more quickly. When the guard stood and turned again, he held in his hand a glass with clear liquid in it.

Thatcher stared aghast. "What the bloody blades are you doing?"

"The High Seeker has been sweating profusely," the guard said in the same stiff voice he had used when speaking before. "The Code requires that prisoners be given water when they are dehydrated."

"I don't care what your bloody Code says! I'm in charge here, and I want you to—"

He stopped. The guard had come close enough for Thatcher to see his eyes. It was the first time Thatcher had seen those eyes for more than a flicker of a second; until now, they had been turned toward the High Seeker. Seeing them, Thatcher knew he had made a very great mistake.

The redhead was not the dangerous guard. This one was.

Thatcher felt his muscles tense, as though he had unexpectedly met a predatory wolf that showed its fangs. But the guard's voice was even when he spoke again. "Mr. Smith will be unable to answer your questions if his voice is too dry to speak."

Thatcher's throat felt dry as well. He waved his hand, leaving it vague as to whether he was giving orders or conceding the battle. The guard came forward and carefully lifted the front flap of the hood in such a manner

that it continued to shield the High Seeker's face from Thatcher's view. At the same time, the guard's gaze swung away.

That gave Thatcher a new idea. "Wait a minute! " he said. "You told me that the Code doesn't allow prisoners to be stripped naked. But does your Code allow prisoners to keep hoods on their faces while they're being racked?"

The guard said nothing, which was answer enough. Instead, he waited until the High Seeker had finished gulping the water, then lowered the cloth of the hood and looked down at the High Seeker.

The High Seeker said in a strained voice, "Do as Mr. Owen bids you, Mr. Sobel."

The guard stopped looking at the High Seeker after that. Thatcher suspected that the guard was ashamed at the High Seeker for ceding battle to Thatcher. As for Thatcher, he was not prepared for the gust of fury that entered him when he saw the High Seeker's face for the first time.

The High Seeker had taught himself to speak with so pure an Yclau accent that, despite the man's earlier words about his resemblance to his father, it had not occurred to Thatcher that he was racking someone who looked like the enemies he had fought. But there was no trace of the supposed Yclau mother in the High Seeker's features: he had the high cheekbones of a Vovimian. His skin was lighter than Thatcher would have expected, but it was still dark enough to tell of his dark origins. Thatcher found himself wondering whether the man had raped Yclau women, like his father had.

"What is your name?" he asked harshly.

"Layle Smith," the High Seeker replied, as he had at the beginning of each previous hour.

"Take him up to level five," Thatcher snapped at the guard. "And do it quickly."

That was the first level at which the High Seeker screamed. Thatcher relished the sound. He thought to himself about all the prisoners this man had abused and broken, and while Thatcher's questions grew no more clever than before, he could receive satisfaction now at seeing the

evidence of pain in the High Seeker's face. By the seventh level, the High Seeker was groaning continuously – no god here. Just a man who was weakening every minute more that he spent in agony.

The guard looked as though his agony was nearly as great as the High Seeker's, but to Thatcher's relief, the guard made no move toward the dagger at his hip. No doubt the High Seeker kept this dangerous dog on a short lease. If not, Thatcher suspected, the dog would have torn Thatcher's throat open several hours before.

"Eleven," the High Seeker whispered at the end of nine hours. "No, ten."

The guard made a move as if to turn the wheel. Thatcher held up his hand. "I give the orders here." He stared down at the High Seeker, trying to make up his mind.

The truth was, he was nervous. He had been waiting now, for two levels, for the body-breaking to occur. And the longer he had to wait, the more he found himself wondering about the consequences of such a breaking. If the High Seeker really was mad enough to let Thatcher break his body – and Thatcher was increasingly of the opinion that madness was at the core of this night's events – then what would happen? Would Thatcher simply be handed over to the magistrate for his execution? Or would a new High Seeker be appointed, one who decided to take revenge on Thatcher for what he had done? Thatcher thought again of the unused instruments on the wall, and he felt his stomach roil.

He chewed his lip, considering his options. He could stop the torture now; that would lose him the Scare, but this was only a game anyway. One way or another, he would end up hanging from a noose. The only question was how much torture he would have to endure until then. What was the point of risking months of torture at the hands of a new High Seeker, just in order to play a game? Was today's victory worth that?

"Eleven," the High Seeker whispered through chattering teeth. His eyes were staring blankly at the ceiling, as though he was not aware of what he said. The word he spoke slid into a groan as a fresh sheen of sweat sprang onto his forehead. The blood vessels in his arms and legs stood out like strings ready to snap. His chest barely moved, though his mouth sucked in air constantly. Tears were flowing freely from his eyes.

The guard once again made a move to heighten the level. "Wait!" said Thatcher quickly, throwing up his hand. He might not have the skills of a Seeker as far as searching a prisoner was concerned, but he had not been made an officer due to dull wits. Something was wrong here.

The guard, the anguished guard who obviously worshipped his Seeker, had twice now tried to raise the level of the racking at the High Seeker's word. He had not done that at any of the previous levels – he had shown great reluctance to move the wheel even when Thatcher issued his orders. The guard must be moving hastily in an attempt to hide something.

The High Seeker's words?

Eleven, the High Seeker had said. Not ten. Nine hours ago he had said, "You have my permission to raise me one level each hour, until you reach ten." Why had he specified ten? Why had he not simply said, "Until you reach the highest point in the racking"?

Thatcher shot a look at the wheel again, knowing already what he would see. The dial only went to ten, but the wheel went much higher than that. Why? To deceive prisoners? It did not matter; what mattered was that this changed everything that Thatcher had been assuming.

He leaned over the rack, appreciating as he did so the stink emanating from the High Seeker's body. This was why the rack room was so cold, obviously – because the prisoner's sweating torment would grow so high.

Thatcher said, "You told me— No, you didn't tell me, but you let me think that your body would break when you reached the tenth level. Will it?"

The guard's hand was frozen on the wheel now; he already knew the answer. Thatcher waited, though, for the High Seeker's faint whisper amidst the groans: "No."

Thatcher smiled. He could feel the sweetness of his victory already. The trick was uncovered – the trick the High Seeker had planned to use to win the Scare. The High Seeker had counted on Thatcher believing that his prisoner's body would break at the tenth level, and on Thatcher losing his nerve before that point. Now, with the trick gone, victory was certain. "What is your name?" he cooed at the High Seeker.

A brief pause, and then: "Down," whispered the High Seeker, and the guard's hand moved the wheel. Slowly, as though he no longer cared whether the High Seeker was released from his pain. Thatcher's smile turned to a grin.

The door of the rack room banged open. The redhead, with murder in his eyes, strode forward and grabbed Thatcher's arm. Thatcher let himself be pulled away, but at the doorway he turned his head to look back. The prisoner lay motionless like a corpse on the ground of a battlefield.

"Third victory; I win the war," Thatcher murmured, and then laughed aloud as he was pulled from the room.

o—o—o

Seward knew that it was only an illusion that the light in the entry hall seemed to have dimmed. The lamps twinkled as brightly as ever in the edges of the vast room; Seward had simply become aware that the light of the entry hall was far overwhelmed by the shadows.

Those shadows were usually cast aside in his mind because they seemed to have no place amidst the lively chatter of the guards. But now the entry hall was utterly silent, as it rarely was except when a prisoner was arriving. Indeed, Seward could not remember the entry hall being this quiet since the worst days of the High Seeker's madness.

He looked across the table at Mr. Boyd, who avoided his gaze. Seward thought to himself that he ought to say something that would reassure the younger guard that he did not blame him for spreading word of what had happened in the rack room. Three dozen guards had seen Seward and Mr. Boyd carry Layle Smith's limp body from the rack room. The truth was better than the types of rumors which could have accompanied that image of the unconscious High Seeker.

Seward broke the silence finally, saying, "Elsdon Taylor is emerging from his two months' mourning tonight."

Mr. Boyd placed three documents into three separate piles before saying, without looking up, "Perhaps he'll be able to help."

No one glanced over from other tables with any indication of interest in the conversation. Everyone in the entry hall seemed weighed down by their own thoughts, or by their memories of the darkness that had overcome this dungeon during the long months of the High Seeker's illness.

There was a difference this time, though. Seward sensed that difference in the frowns, and even more in the lack of enquiries as to whether the High Seeker's body was recovering. Last time Layle Smith had been the victim, but this time the inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon blamed the High Seeker for what was happening. It was a paradox: they believed the High Seeker to be mad, but because he showed no obvious sign of being mad, they blamed him for his folly.

Seward shot a glance at the narrow door leading to the Codifier's office. The dungeon's ethical supervisor had been busy this month, responding to a bevy of guards – and even Seekers – who wished him to remove the High Seeker from duty. So far the Codifier had responded only with a terse refusal. Except to Seward. He had asked Seward whether he wished to continue with his current duties, and Seward had known that, if he requested to be transferred to another Seeker, the Codifier would remove the High Seeker from his prisoner.

Seward had not requested to be assigned to another Seeker.

He tried to concentrate his thoughts on the documents he was sorting. A number of the guards nearby were gazing into space, as though unable to keep their minds on their work. Across from him, Mr. Boyd gave a frustrated grunt, and then pulled half a dozen documents out of the piles into which he had just sorted them.

So still was the cavern that Seward jumped at the soft sound of a door closing. He looked up and saw that the High Seeker was beginning to walk across the darkness in the middle of the hall.

For a moment, Seward sat paralyzed; then he sprang up and walked forward to meet the High Seeker midway. He could feel that every eye in the entry hall was upon Layle Smith. Seward himself could see that the High Seeker moved in a labored manner, like a man attempting to walk through treacle.

As soon as he reached the High Seeker, Seward said, "Sir, you ought not to be out of your bed. You're not well."

Too late, he realized how this might be taken by the surrounding guards, and by the High Seeker himself. But Layle Smith said simply, "I mend best when I am at my work. Come with me, please." He beckoned past Seward, and Seward turned to see that Mr. Boyd was making his way cautiously forward, slower than the High Seeker evidently cared for.

"Where are we going, sir?" asked Seward, even as he realized that he ought not to be questioning the High Seeker. Not here, in front of the watching audience.

"To finish my searching," the High Seeker said briskly as he turned in the direction of the door leading to the prisoners' cells. He continued to move with difficulty, and Seward wondered whether the healer would burst into the entry hall at any moment, roaring his disapproval that the High Seeker was endangering his health by rising early from his healing bed.

Seward realized that the High Seeker and Mr. Boyd were halfway to the door already, and he hurried to catch up. He was in time to hear Mr. Boyd say in a low voice, "Sir, this is a dangerous prisoner. I ought to assist Mr. Sobel tonight in guarding you."

"No," said the High Seeker without looking at either of them. "The prisoner fears you more than he fears Mr. Sobel, and I want him relaxed tonight. Unwary. Without thought of danger."

Mr. Boyd cast a despairing look at Seward, who gave him a grimace of a smile in thanks for Mr. Boyd's attempt at assistance. Not that he was surprised by Layle Smith's refusal. He set himself into his usual position, as close to the High Seeker as his shadow, and glanced back at the other guards. He half expected to see them rising with daggers and whips in their hands, ready to hold back the mad High Seeker. But everyone in the entry hall seemed as paralyzed as Seward had been before. No one tried to stop the High Seeker from going where his determination took him.

Which left only one man to stop the High Seeker. Seward touched his dagger lightly, as though to assure himself that it was still there, and

turned his eyes back to Layle Smith. He dared not look away again – not until this was all over.

They entered the dark corridor leading to the cells.

CHAPTER SIX

Thatcher had been having a bad month. It ought to have been a good month: a month's reprieve from being searched by the mad High Seeker, a month to savor his triumph. Instead, he had been plagued every night by dreams of the Vovimian girl, only now they were mixed in with dreams of the High Seeker, lying motionless on the rack. What connection there was between those two images, Thatcher could not imagine, other than that both were defeated enemies.

His only comfort, standing once more in the presence of his Seeker, was that the High Seeker looked as though his month had been worse. He did a good job of hiding it, but Thatcher had seen the man's hand grip the door tight as he entered, clearly using it for support, and his guard was closer to him than before, as though he feared that his Seeker would collapse. The High Seeker was making his best effort to appear as tranquil as on the first day, but tremors ran through his body every minute or so.

Thatcher waited for him to speak, but the High Seeker remained silent, and after a while, Thatcher realized the man had nothing to say. What could he say? Thatcher decided to say it for him.

"You lost," he stated with a smile.

The High Seeker did not bother to deny the fact. He simply stood trembling, like a ghost visiting his former life.

"You're a fool too." Thatcher could not resist tightening the rack another notch. "You thought you could make me feel sorry for you – you, the man spawned from the race that has attacked our queendom all these years. You, trying to break the soldier who has been fighting against your kind. And you actually thought I might pity you." Thatcher laughed.

He saw the guard's hands tighten into fists, and then quickly relax. The High Seeker remained dumb.

"You were a fool on the rack too," Thatcher taunted. "You were so close to winning there – you know that, don't you? I would have conceded you the battle if you'd told me that your body would break when I raised you to ten. But you didn't, you idiot. You went through nine hours of intense pain

for nothing. Nothing at all. Fire in your flesh, break-lines in your bones, and it all went to waste because you were too much of a fool to lie to me. You told me the truth—"

He stopped. The tremors continued upon the High Seeker's motionless body, like waves dashing themselves fruitlessly against a solid rock. The guard's gaze remained fixed on his Seeker. He had not yet realized that something had happened.

It took Thatcher some time to find his voice again. Then he asked hoarsely, "What do you want from me?"

"Only what you demand of others, Mr. Owen," the High Seeker replied, as quiet as a hidden viper. "The truth. Can you truly say, in complete honesty, that it was necessary for you to kill those children?"

The corpse on the ground stirred and raised its head. Before Thatcher could react, it had pinned him to the ground in a death-grip.

o—o—o

Seward knew that it could only be his imagination, but he was certain he could hear, from the other end of the dungeon, the soft singing of the guard appointed to the twelve-hour watch in the crematorium.

Seward turned his attention to the bare back before him. Reaching down, he ran his thumbs firmly along the two sides of the spine, eliciting something close to a sigh from the High Seeker.

Layle Smith, sitting in his usual chair and bent over his office desk, said for the third time, "This is not part of your duties, Mr. Sobel."

"I'd just like to see whether I've lost the knack." This was less than truthful. He had gone to the healer that morning and begged him for information on how he might aid the High Seeker's recovery.

Layle Smith no doubt knew this. He knew everything that took place in his dungeon. He remained silent, though. Seward wondered whether he too was thinking of the prayers taking place at the other end of the dungeon.

After a while, Seward said, "You fooled me as well. Up until the last moment, I was sure that you had undergone torture in an attempt to stir

compassion in your prisoner."

"It would take greater skill than mine to do that." The High Seeker's voice was muffled. His head was hidden in his arms as he bent over the desk; yet even so his hood remained over his face.

The High Seeker added, "If Mr. Owen had any potential for compassion in him, then surely it would have occurred to him over these long years that his grandmother, in using treacherous methods to try to keep him to her path, had succeeded only in losing that which she valued most. No, Mr. Owen wasn't seeking to learn compassion. He wanted honesty – he wanted high proof that at least one person in the world was willing to be completely truthful to him."

They were silent a while more. The only sound in the office was the faint murmur of guards in the entry hall outside and the flicker of flame in the single oil lamp that was lit. And the singing in Seward's ears.

"Of course he was right."

Seward craned his neck to look to the side of Layle Smith's head, though this was a useless gesture, since all that could be seen was the black cloth of the hood. "Sir?"

A light knock rattled the door. The High Seeker straightened up with what sounded like a suppressed moan. Wordlessly, Seward handed him his shirt. Not until the shirt was completely buttoned and tucked into his trousers did the High Seeker say, "Enter."

The door opened a space, but nothing entered except a head, which poked inside the office. "I don't mean to disturb you, sir," said the visitor, looking between the High Seeker and Seward with faint curiosity.

"There is no need to apologize, Mr. Urman," replied the High Seeker in a cool voice. "How are you feeling?"

Mr. Urman gave a grimace as he opened the door wide enough to slide inside. Leaving the door ajar, he said, "Well, sir, my pain has subsided to daily headaches – the healer says I'm likely to have them for the rest of my life. I told him, if that was the worst legacy I took from a career in the

Eternal Dungeon, then I was better off than most of the people who pass through this place."

Seward winced. Mr. Urman, he guessed, was not being intentionally cruel. It was unlikely that he yet knew of the aftermath of the attack.

The High Seeker's voice remained as level as before. "Then you are ready to return to your duties?"

"Yes, sir. That's all I came to tell you. I'll leave now." The guard hesitated, but if the High Seeker had any praise for the young man who had come close to sacrificing his life for the Eternal Dungeon, the praise remained unspoken.

Seward sighed inwardly as the door shut. Out of the many gifts that Layle Smith had been born with, an ability to speak warmly to his fellow humans was not one of them. The High Seeker had undergone torture for a prisoner and would no doubt have risked his life for Mr. Urman. But Mr. Urman did not know this, and so the only impression the guard would carry away from this encounter was that Layle Smith did not value his service. No doubt this would add to the High Seeker's dark reputation in the dungeon.

This thought brought others. Seward was still standing in reverie when the High Seeker said, "What is on your mind, Mr. Sobel?"

Seward jumped in place and felt himself wince again, this time inwardly. It was dangerous to allow the pain he felt sometimes in the High Seeker's presence to occupy his mind for more than a minute. The High Seeker was too well trained at sensing inner turmoil. "Nothing pertaining to my duties, sir," he said quickly. This response had always stopped such conversations in the past.

Once again, it succeeded. The High Seeker turned away and began gathering papers on his desk, saying, "That is how Mr. Owen was right."

"Sir?" It took Seward a moment to connect the High Seeker's remark with what Layle Smith had said before.

"Mr. Owen was right that I was lying to him. I let him think that Mr. Urman was dead, in order to increase the chance that Mr. Owen would confess to his war crimes. I let Mr. Owen think that my aim was to raise

compassion in him, when in fact my aim was to reach that moment when he asked me whether my body would break on the rack. I knew exactly what path Mr. Owen would follow, and I led him up it with as much deviousness as his grandmother had shown. Our relationship was based on lies."

Seward did not know what to say for a moment. No doubt Elsdon Taylor was privileged to hear of Layle Smith's self-doubts following a searching. Seward himself had never before heard such words from the High Seeker. Had the madness changed him? Or had something about this particular prisoner prised open a door long kept locked?

At last Seward borrowed words from the Code: "'Under no circumstances may a Seeker lie to a prisoner. He may, however, mislead the prisoner if to do so would be in the prisoner's best interests.'"

"A rule that is open to the worst abuses," said the High Seeker, not looking up to where Seward stood beside him. "No doubt Mr. Owen's grandmother also thought she was following her grandson's best interests by keeping him out of the army. What makes me any different from the grandmother Mr. Owen despised?"

The difference, Seward thought, was that he considered it unlikely that anyone would be prepared to sacrifice their life for Mr. Owen's grandmother. But these were not words he could speak aloud to the High Seeker. He felt again the pain that came to him at moments like this.

"Mr. Sobel." The High Seeker's voice was very soft in a familiar way that made Seward's body tense. "My junior night guard has undergone permanent injury while serving in my dungeon; my body aches as though the High Master of hell has torn it to pieces; my ears are ringing from the sound of the Vovimian ambassador's curses when I suggested during the trial that a confessed child-murderer be granted the mercy of a prison term; and a prisoner of mine lies in the crematorium, in the form of ashes. In short, I am not in a good temper. Either voice what your thought is, or take a break from duty until you can return your mind to your work."

The pain increased. Never, in his years with the High Seeker, had Seward received a reprimand like this. Indeed, he could not remember any time that he had received a reprimand at all – merely mild suggestions on how

to improve his performance. He felt his breath heavy within him, as though he stood before the bowl that would hold Mr. Owen's ashes until the twelve hours were over and he was buried in the communal pit.

"Mr. Sobel!" The High Seeker's voice was a whiplash this time.

Seward resisted the urge to flee from the room; it was too late for that. He said truthfully, "I was wondering what your face looked like, sir."

Layle Smith slowly turned his head toward Seward. His eyes were too dim in the lamplight to read. "I was unhooded when I first arrived at the Eternal Dungeon."

"That was many years ago, sir." He thought it best not to add that he had done his best to forget those first, terrifying days of his acquaintance with Layle Smith.

"You saw my face in the rack room. And also, if I have understood Mr. Taylor's account correctly, on the day I entered fully into madness."

"No, sir. I turned away my gaze both times."

The hooded man sitting near him continued to look upon him in the dark light. Seward felt again the desire to flee. Then, to his amazement, he heard a soft chuckle emerge from the hood.

"Mr. Owen is hardly the first person to ask why I took up this work," Layle Smith said. "Other than the obvious reasons, I remain a Seeker because I so often learn valuable lessons from my prisoners." His hand rose to the edge of his face-cloth.

Seward turned his head swiftly away. His heart was running full pace now. "No, sir," he said. "That isn't what I was seeking."

"No?" The High Seeker's voice held mild curiosity. "I seem to recall that, a number of years ago, you offered me the honor of your friendship and were rewarded by a brusque refusal on my part."

Seward ventured to turn his head back. The High Seeker was where he had been before, sitting behind his desk with his fingers touching his face-cloth, waiting.

"That's so," Seward said, accepting both the statement and the implicit apology. "But that was before Mr. Taylor entered this dungeon, sir. Having witnessed the two of you together, and having seen the struggles you both undergo to keep your private relationship from interfering with your public duties . . . Well, sir, I reached the conclusion a couple of years ago that I'm better off simply as your guard. It's easier on both of us that way."

After a moment, Layle Smith's fingers slipped away from the hood. "I see," he said. "Then I confess I'm confused. I sense that something about our present relations with one another disturbs you. If it is not our lack of friendship, then what is it? What is your goal with me?"

The words echoed oddly in Seward's head, as though he had heard them in the far past. He wondered wildly how he had allowed matters to reach this point, beyond anything that the sensible part of him had ever wanted.

Layle Smith waited. Finally Seward said in a low voice, "I was just wondering, sir . . . whether it mattered. My service to you."

The High Seeker's eyes were black holes in his hood. His body had lost its usual rigidity, as it always did when he was breaking prisoners. After a while he said in a flat voice, "You are wondering this because I did not ask you to assist me during the time I was entering into madness, nor during the time of my healing."

Seward said nothing; he could feel that his face must be flush-red by now. It was the act of a child to tug on an elder's shirt and say, "Do you like me? Do you want me to be here? Would you miss me if I left?" The High Seeker had no doubt thought better of him than that. Seward felt the pain renew in him as he wondered whether this momentary lapse on his part would destroy what trust remained between himself and his workmaster.

The High Seeker indicated a chair. After a moment, Seward stiffly sat down across from Layle Smith, feeling as though he had come to this office solely for the purpose of receiving a reprimand, rather than to seek Layle Smith's signature on Seward's latest report. The High Seeker leaned back slightly in his chair, playing with his pen as though it were a dagger. Finally Layle Smith said, "Do you recall the period when you were first appointed to me?"

"Of course, sir." The walls of Seward's throat seemed to be sticking together; he could barely breathe now.

"The Codifier asked me whether I wanted you, or whether he should assign another guard to me. He knew that it would not be easy for me, having a shadow – being shadowed day and night, back in those days. . . . I asked him whether he had told you of my past – of as much of my past as anyone in this dungeon knew in those days. He said that he had not considered it necessary."

The High Seeker leaned forward. His eyes flamed into light under the lamp, green like a cat's. "He advised me to read through your records. I did so, and discovered that you had led as pure a life as any man can hope to live. No crimes. No marks for misbehavior in school. Diamond-bright recommendations from every person who had known you for any length of time. You seemed to have lived a life as stainless as Mercy herself. The question arose in my mind – as the Codifier had intended it to arise – of why a man of unblemished character would seek to work in a dungeon filled with the filthiest criminals of Yclau. And why he would volunteer to work with me."

There was a pause. After a while, Seward realized that he was expected to answer the question. Feeling, as he rarely did, the chill of the dungeon, he said, "I suppose it was because of the diviner, sir."

Through the holes of his hood, Layle Smith raised his eyebrows.

Seward told the story then, stumbling upon the words, for he had never spoken of this to anyone but his wife. By the time he finished, Layle Smith was staring at the wall beyond him. Without shifting his gaze, the High Seeker said, "Do you believe that the diviner told you the truth?"

"I'm sure she didn't, sir." Then, as Layle Smith's gaze snapped over to him, Seward added, "Oh, she may have had powers beyond that of ordinary humans. I wouldn't know. But if she did, I don't think she used them on me. Her fate-telling was too general – her words could have applied to anyone who walked into her dwelling. She didn't waste her powers on someone who had entered her tent in order to mock her. She told me what she thought I wanted to hear, in hopes that I would reward her."

"Indeed." The High Seeker's voice was unsurprised. No doubt he had already deduced this from Seward's tale. "You seem to have encountered corruption at an early age, like Mr. Owen – and you could not even tell yourself, as Mr. Owen could have if he had thought the matter through, that you were as capable of such evil as the person who betrayed you."

"That's just it, Mr. Smith." Seward leaned forward, his voice now earnest. "That was what hurt the most. Until that time I'd thought of myself as you described me before: pure, unblemished in character. I was proud of myself for that. But when I asked myself why it was that my fellow guards mocked the diviner and I did not – why it was that I led a life of straightness while the diviner wound her way down a crooked path – I realized that the answer was the same in both cases. I was lucky. I was born into good circumstances, with good parents who gently taught me right from wrong, and thanks to some inborn gift, I was not drawn into strong temptation to do evil as most other men are. Nothing I had done in my life made me worthy of the praise I had received. I was good, not because I had tried hard to be good, but simply because I found it easy to be good."

The High Seeker said nothing. His eyes were now fixed upon Seward, unwavering but for the light that danced over them.

"I began to look at the people around me," Seward said, "the people I had thought to be my inferiors because they did evil. I began to realize that they might have spent a far greater portion of their lives fighting against temptation than I had. I was no better than the prisoners I had despised. And I began to realize that the men who were strongly drawn to evil, and who kept themselves from doing evil, were much better than I, who had never been strongly drawn to evil."

His voice was hoarse by the end of his speech; he felt drained, as though he had emptied himself of all his blood. He waited.

The High Seeker's gaze drifted down to the table, and to the pen before him. He touched it lightly, and then said, without looking up, "I wanted to attack Mr. Owen when I was searching him. You know that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know what I would have done to him if I had attacked him?"

"I can guess, sir." He could indeed; he had heard the High Seeker frighten prisoners for two decades, and he could guess how close a link those imaginary threats had with the High Seeker's own dreamings.

In the long silence that followed, the sound of singing swelled strong in Seward's ears. Finally the High Seeker tossed aside the pen and looked up. "I did not ask you to assist me during my illness – though I very much desired your presence – because I feared that I would lose you if you saw the full depths of what I am. That was faithless of me. I ought to have known better, from the clue to your character that your records gave me twenty-one years ago. . . . Mr. Sobel, you do not know of my past."

Seward hesitated, unsure of how to contradict the High Seeker's apparent lapse in memory. "Sir, you revealed three years ago that you once worked in Vovim's Hidden Dungeon. I know that you would have been trained there to abuse prisoners—"

"Mr. Sobel," the High Seeker said softly, "you do not know of my past. You only know the part I made public. Only a few people in this dungeon know the full story of my past: the Codifier, the healer, Mr. Chapman whom I count as friend, and of course Mr. Taylor. Would you like to know what I have not told the rest of the dungeon?"

Seward felt his throat tighten once more, but he nodded, and for the next hour sat appalled, listening to what the world did not know about Layle Smith. The darkness that everyone thought lay within the High Seeker . . . that dim dreadfulness was only a pale shadow to what the High Seeker truly was. It was as though all the darkness of the world had gathered itself into one place, and had chosen to reside in Layle Smith.

After it was all over, and Seward was sitting in a small pool of his own sweat, the High Seeker waited. Seward could not read from his eyes whether he was worried or whether, this time, he held faith in his guard. Seward cleared his throat and said, "Sir, could you teach me the technique you used to keep yourself from attacking Mr. Owen? It might be of help to me, the next time I'm tempted to lose my temper with my wife."

A smile travelled onto Layle Smith's face then. Seward could see it through the change in the High Seeker's eyes. He had watched the High Seeker's eyes smile many times over the years, but in the past, the smile had only appeared when he racked prisoners.

"Of course, Mr. Sobel," Layle Smith said. "And perhaps you can offer suggestions on how I might improve my technique. I imagine that maintaining a peaceful domestic life has taught you valuable lessons."

And so they talked on, and in the brightly lit crematorium, Mr. Boyd reached the end of his song of praise for the executed prisoner. He scattered Thatcher Owen's ashes to start him on his journey into new life, and then returned to the darkness of the Eternal Dungeon.

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. . . The danger seemed particularly strong, given the crime the prisoner had committed, yet there is no evidence that Layle Smith allowed his Vovimian heritage to prejudice him against the prisoner who had committed war crimes against his native people.

Indeed, if it were not for the records which tell us that Layle Smith was born and raised in Yclau's neighboring kingdom of Vovim, and that he was trained in Vovim's infamous Hidden Dungeon, it would be hard to know this from the early records of the High Seeker's career in the Eternal Dungeon. Despite the efforts of historians to prove otherwise, it appears that Layle Smith's skills as a Seeker derived, not from his Vovimian training, but from his innate talent.

Yet it was in this very year that Layle Smith's heritage would play a small but crucial role in what must at first have appeared to be nothing more than the usual disputes between dungeon workers, but which ultimately would lead to the greatest crisis the Eternal Dungeon had ever faced.

It is therefore important that, before we witness Layle Smith in the role he played in that crisis, we pause a moment to recall what Layle Smith was on the eve of the crisis: a man of such commitment to help prisoners that he would allow himself to undergo great suffering on their behalf.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

The Balance 2
BARBARIANS

The year 359, the sixth month.

Countless books, paintings, and films have been produced about Vovim's torture-god. Hell, it seems, provides endless fascination, even for a generation that doubts the god's existence.

As a result of this current cult, historians often forget that Vovim never possessed a monotheistic religion. Its religion was polytheistic – or, to be more precise, duotheistic, with a host of lesser gods. Hell certainly played a central role in Vovim's religion in the fourth century, but so did Mercy.

The torture-god is so strongly identified in the popular mind with Vovim's old dungeon of torture that one historian has gone as far to say that Vovim's Hidden Dungeon was devoted to the service of Hell, while the Eternal Dungeon in neighboring Yclau was devoted to the service of Mercy . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

The King of Vovim sat on his throne, his cloak flowing onto the floor in a regal manner. He did not deign to look at his guest, but stared upward at the gilded dome of his throne room, shining bright in the afternoon sunlight streaming through the high windows.

"Twenty-four years ago," he said, "one of the master torturers at my dungeon took an apprentice. The boy was nothing before he came to the dungeon – nameless, having accomplished no deed in his life that would attract others' attention. But the man who apprenticed him thought he had potential to serve the King. The boy certainly appeared to have some small capacity in the art of searching prisoners. Then, at the end of three years, before he had finished his apprenticehood, the boy ran away. Broke his oath to serve the King and fled to the land of Yclau, *our enemy in war!"*

The guards, standing at stiff attention on both sides of the King and on the perimeter of the vast room, winced at the sound of the King's roar. A couple of them shuffled uneasily, as though they were accustomed to seeing unpleasant sights follow from such a roar. The King, though, followed his scream by flopping back into his throne and saying, "Milly, I want more of those tomatoes. The sweet ones."

"Of course, sire!" The man lounging at the feet of the King put down his glass and reached with eager hand to the platter resting on the floor beside him. Crouching on his knees like a dog begging for food, he carefully placed the tiny tomatoes, one by one, into the King's open mouth, pausing only as the King swallowed.

The King waved away the last of the tomatoes, and the man returned to the ground, raising his glass and letting the liquid in it swirl about in a playful manner. Taking no further notice of him, the King said, "This traitor – Layle Smith was his name – proceeded to tell poisonous lies to the world, claiming that Yclau's Eternal Dungeon was better than any other dungeon in the world. Not surprisingly, his flattery worked. In due time, he was appointed High Master of that dungeon – 'High Seeker,' as he styled himself. He let people call him the greatest torturer in the world, though any gifts he might have possessed he had stolen from my dungeon. Then,

three years ago, he made a mistake. It was a very great mistake, wasn't it, Milly?"

"Oh, the High Seeker *excels* at mistakes, sire!"

"Be quiet, Milly – I didn't ask your views on the High Seeker."

The man kissed the knee of the King in an apparent attempt to placate him. The King ruffled his hair, causing the man to give a simpering smile. "Where was I?" asked the King.

"You were speaking of that horrible traitor before I rudely interrupted you," the man said, picking at the food on the platter, his mind now apparently absorbed in a decision over which of the delicacies to choose.

"Oh, yes. Well, the traitor, Layle Smith, made the mistake of persuading the Queen of Yclau to send one of the Eternal Dungeon's junior Seekers to Vovim, to deliver her message to me concerning peace talks. The Seeker in question, a man by the name of Taylor, was actually Layle Smith's love-mate – can you believe that? He risked his own love-mate! Naturally, I had the junior Seeker arrested—"

Several of the guards shuffled in their place, exchanging glances. The man at the King's feet quickly looked up and said, "Forgive me for my audacity in interrupting, sire. I believe you meant to say that a traitor torturer in your dungeon kidnapped the ambassador, unbeknownst to you."

"Of course." The King accepted this translation with ease, then reached out and hit the man hard in the head. The guard nearest the man gripped his rifle tight, as though fearing he would need to make use of it. But the man reacted neither with sign of pain nor with anger. He simply hung his head like a puppy who has received just punishment.

"That was *your* fault, High Master," the King told the man. "You should have known you had a traitor in your dungeon."

"You are too good to me, sire." The head torturer of Vovim's Hidden Dungeon did not raise his face. "The times you have forgiven me are far too great to count. I don't understand why I have so much difficulty controlling the torturers under my care. For some reason, my men don't seem to respect me."

There was an audible snigger from the guard nearest the High Master. Several guards shifted their hands over their mouths in an evident attempt to hide their smiles.

The King did not attempt to hide his. He laughed openly and ruffled the torturer's hair again. "Grow up to be a man, and maybe they'll respect you, Milly."

The High Master, who looked to be twenty years older than the King, reacted to this remark by kissing the King's knee again. The King gave another laugh and said, "Now, what was my tale? Oh, yes; Layle Smith's love-mate, Taylor, was kidnapped to the Hidden Dungeon. He was tortured, of course – and raped also, I believe?"

"Most certainly, sire." The High Master, whose face had been hidden by his long hair since the blow, looked up at the King, smiling. "Even a traitor torturer would not neglect to fulfill his duties to you."

"You train them well," the King said offhandedly, and the High Master beamed, as though he were a small child who had been praised. "At any rate," the King said, "Layle Smith's love-mate would have died there, except that I received word from the United Order of Prisons, which was meeting in Vovim at that time, that Taylor was being held in the Hidden Dungeon. The conference delegates asked permission to send a raiding party to the dungeon, led by the Yclau delegate." The King shrugged. "I gave them permission. In my mercy. Of course, any love-mate of that traitor apprentice deserved a lingering death, but I wanted the world to see that Layle Smith's claims were wrong. The Hidden Dungeon, not the Eternal Dungeon, is the most civilized dungeon in the world."

Several of the guards apparently decided it was safest at this point to burst into applause; they did this the Vovimian way, by jumping up and down. The King smiled at them indulgently.

Then, without warning, he was on his feet, kicking aside the platter and splattering wine onto the legs of his guest. The King took no notice of him.

"It was all a trick!" the royal personage screamed. "The Yclau delegate was Layle Smith himself, disguised as a guard, returning to Vovim in defiance of my death sentence upon him! He took his love-mate back to

Yclau and claimed *I* was the one who ordered the man's torture! He made me look like a fool!"

The guards stared at the dome, at the floor, at the guest . . . anywhere but in the direction of their furious monarch. The High Master apparently did not consider such cautionary measures to be strong enough – he had fallen to his hands and knees and was kissing the King's feet. "Please, sire," he begged, "do not allow that ugly traitor to disturb you. He is not worth more than a wave of your hand to order his death."

The King considered this as the red in his face receded. Then he chuckled and reached down to pet his High Master. "I suppose so. Milly, I'd like some more of those tomatoes."

"I have been selfish and eaten the rest," the High Master said, his gaze flicking away from the tomato that the King had stomped underfoot. "I can give you some nice sweet-pastries, though."

"Oh, very well." The King flopped back onto his throne, pouting petulantly.

The High Master carefully gathered up one of the untrampled sweet-pastries and fed it into the mouth of the King, and then just as carefully wiped the King's mouth with his fingers. Afterwards, he transferred those fingers to his own mouth, which caused the King to smile.

Now thoroughly returned to good humor, the King turned his attention to his guest, who had been standing motionless throughout this recital. "How very nice it is," the King said with a dark smile, "to finally meet you, Taylor."

Elsdon Taylor did not reply. He felt chilled to his innermost flesh, and it was not merely because cold manacles bound his wrists behind him, nor that he stood naked in the King's throne room. The chill had grown upon him as he watched the King throw his tantrums.

Another onlooker, perhaps, might have thought that the King's behavior was nothing more than the spoiled antics of young royalty. But Elsdon, who had not yet reached the King's age, knew that it was more than that. *A*

mad King, the High Seeker's voice whispered in Elsdon's memory, and the junior Seeker shivered.

The King had paused to allow the crouching High Master to feed him more pastries. Now he looked up and said to Elsdon, "So why did you try to creep across my border? Tell me that!"

"Sire," Elsdon said, in the even tone he used with prisoners who persisted in dreaming the world into the shape of their own fancy, "I apologize for correcting you on this point, but I did not creep over the border. I applied for entrance at the border, in a lawful fashion, and once I had been granted that entrance, your border soldiers arrested me—"

"I say you crept over my border!" The King threw a pastry hard upon the ground, narrowly missing his High Master. "You came here as a criminal, to assassinate me! Or to commit some other crime. Isn't that right, Milly?"

"Oh, he has certainly committed some crime, sire." The High Master paused from licking his fingers. "We will discover what that crime is when I question him."

The guard nearest the King turned his snigger into a cough this time. The High Master took no notice of him, but bent down and began licking at the crumbs upon the platter, as though he were a dog.

This sight put the King back into an amiable mood. He nudged the High Master with his foot, in the same manner that a man might stroke a beloved pet. "What crime have you committed?" he asked Elsdon, his voice quick with curiosity.

Elsdon had to pause to formulate his reply. He had thought it would be easy, communicating with the King – the fates knew that he had searched many difficult prisoners since becoming a Seeker. But with his prisoners he had always been the one in power, the person who could turn the conversation onto a new path if needed. This experience of being powerless, and of trying to transform a man who held his life dangling over a pit, brought back all the worst memories of his life. Of which the worst, no doubt, was the time he had spent in the Hidden Dungeon.

And would spend again, judging from the smirks that the High Master was sending his way at periodic intervals.

Elsdon tried to cleanse his mind by thinking of the beauty around him: the great dome above, with its golden pattern of stars and comets; the white marble pillars veined in deep red that the soldiers stood against, which were capped with carvings of men and women on theater stages. This was Vovim, as much as the mad King and the fool at his feet, who was now lapping with his tongue. If only Elsdon could reach the good that lay within his love-mate's native land, then his mission might be accomplished.

He tried again. "Sire, I have no wish to do you harm – on the contrary, I have come in the hope of providing you with assistance you need. We heard in the Eternal Dungeon that you have decided to withdraw from the promise you made to the United Order of Prisons three years ago, to reform Vovim's dungeon and prisons. I believe I can show you the advantages—"

"I broke no promises!" The King had risen his feet again. The guards around the room were wincing once more from his screams and casting dubious looks at Elsdon, as though they did not expect him to survive this exchange.

The picture of a royal figure making a humble prisoner cower was broken in the next moment as the King stamped his foot and said, "I never break my promises! The people who say that lie! Tell them, Milly!"

The High Master rose from the ground in a languorous movement, as though he were a slovenly woman rising from her bed. He was smiling. "Oh, sire, anyone who says that does not know you as I do. You have never broken your promise of favor to me, and you never will – I know that, and this man is a fool if he thinks otherwise."

"I want him punished!" The King was pouting again. "Do you hear me, Milly? I want him punished for what he said!"

The High Master came forward to stand in front of Elsdon. The smile did not leave his face as he reached forward and lightly touched one of Elsdon's nipples, which was hard in the cool air. Elsdon stood motionless,

barely breathing as the High Master traced his finger down his prisoner's chest, and then lower.

"It will be my pleasure," the High Master purred, "to punish him for you, sire."

The King was leaning forward, trying to see what the High Master was doing. "You like the idea of punishing him?" he asked, and his voice held no eagerness, only suspicion.

The High Master's smile did not waver as he stepped back. "Of *course*, sire. Even the most disagreeable tasks I undertake with joy, knowing that I am serving you."

The King relaxed back into his throne; several of the guards emitted sighs of relief. The High Master returned to his place and began picking crumbs off the floor, one by one, as though he were an ant collecting grains of sand.

"Sire," Elsdon said in a more breathless voice than before, "I did not mean to condemn any motives you had for acting as you did. No doubt you had poor advisors." He could not forebear from shooting a glance at the High Master, who smiled sweetly back at him. Elsdon felt his heart continue to thump loud, as it had from the moment the High Master had touched him. He managed to rip his gaze away and add, "My only desire is to offer you whatever help you require in determining the future of Vovim's dungeon and prisons. I have brought with me a book that tells of Yclau's experience in such matters—"

"Oh, a *book!"* The High Master began to pat around his clothes, looking for something. It appeared that the search would take a lifetime, for the man was wearing a garment of loose fabric that looked vaguely like a shirt and trousers, but in the right light might have looked instead like a dress. He cast his hand within this fold and that crevice until, with a shrill cry of triumph such as a child might have produced, he pulled from one of the folds a book with a black cover and gold letters stamped upon it.

He held the volume high, so that the guards at the far end of the room craned their necks to see it. "Is *this* the book you mean, Seeker?" His voice purred again, soft and vicious.

"What is that?" the King demanded. "Let me see it!"

"Of course, sire!" The High Master tossed the book into the King's lap as though it were a toy to be played with. The King snatched the book up and opened it, but frowned.

"These aren't words!" he said. "They aren't like any of the words I was taught by my tutor!"

The guards flanking the King exchanged brief, anxious looks, as though concerned that their ruler had lost what little ability he had for his work. The High Master simply laughed, though, saying, "It's written in *Yclau!* Would you believe it, sire? He brought us a book written in his own language, expecting us to know his barbaric tongue!"

The King's laughter was enthusiastically taken up by all of the guards, who seemed to find this idea to be the height of amusement. The High Master, with another limp movement, pulled the book from the King's lap and began turning it this way and that, as though trying to figure out which direction the book should be placed in. His antics were not lost on the King, who nearly slid from his throne in hysteria as the High Master held the book from one corner, between thumb and index finger, licking his lips in apparent uncertainty as to what method he should take to tackle the mystery before him.

The guards' laughter, it was now clear, was aimed at the High Master. The High Master showed no sign that he was aware of this. He surrendered his battle with a sigh of exasperation and looked over at Elsdon with a pout that imitated the King's. *"You* know what it says!" he declared. "You tell us! What does it say here, on the first page?"

"The first words of the *Code of Seeking*," Elsdon said quietly, "are, 'A Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners.'"

He could not have spoken further if he had wished; the King's laughter was so great this time that the Vovimian ruler was having to claw at the arms of his throne to keep upright. Several of the guards looked as though they were having to use their rifles as staffs to keep from falling over in their hilarity.

The High Master appeared to have a more serene sense of humor. Or perhaps it was simply that he was a torturer, and he hated to waste any opportunity. With a small smile, he carelessly tore from the book a page, crumpled it into a ball, and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing with an exaggerated movement of the jaw.

Elsdon was already suffused with heat from the laughter around him. Now he felt a flame of rage enter him which was so great that it took all his loyalty to the Seekers' Code to keep him from stepping forward and kicking the High Master in his face. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe in slowly. *It was only the title page*, he told himself. *He is not destroying the Code. And even if he tried to destroy the book, he could not destroy the Code itself. The Code lies within the hearts of men; it is not dependent on ink and paper for its existence.*

He heard the High Master say, "Sire, he's right! The Yclau *do* have something to teach us! They can send us lots of these books, and we can use them to solve our land's famine problem!"

"Or we could use them in our water closets," the King replied, entering into the spirit of the game. "We need some good paper with which to clean our toilets. And maybe we could persuade Yclau's High Seeker to come and clean the toilets for us—"

"Oh!" The High Master's squeal stilled the laughter around the room. "Sire, I almost forgot! I have the most *wonderful* news for you!"

Elsdon opened his eyes in time to see several of the guards give one another knowing looks. Whatever this news was, it appeared that the other members of the palace household already knew it, and they were simply waiting for the right person to present it to the King. Elsdon supposed that not many Vovimians cared to serve the King closely, given his changeable moods.

Besides, Elsdon thought, his chest tightening as the High Master sent another stinging smile his way, it appeared that it was the High Master's privilege to present this particular news.

"What? What? Tell me!" said the King eagerly.

"You needn't worry about extending an invitation to the High Seeker to clean toilets," the High Master said in his purring voice. "He won't be able to respond to the invitation. Sire, he has gone *mad*!"

There was a pause, and then the King said in a disappointed voice, "What, again?"

"Oh, but this is better than last time, sire." The High Master shot another glance at Elsdon, who was standing as frozen as a prisoner of hell, encased in ice. "You see, the Yclau hold to the odd custom of not forcing food and water upon the ill – they say that it is every person's right to decide when he should enter into his *rebirth*." The word was spoken with such contempt that the King chuckled and petted the High Master, as though soothing a yipping dog. The High Master smiled under the King's touch and added, "Last time Layle Smith went into madness, he was incapable of giving himself food or drink – he only survived because his love-mate was by his side and was able to pull him back from madness. This time . . ." He looked over at Elsdon, his grey eyes glittering like children's play-pebbles.

The King gave a sharp, delighted laugh. "You're certain of this?" he asked the High Master. "It isn't simply a rumor?"

The High Master shrugged. "If Layle Smith has died, the Eternal Dungeon wouldn't be likely to admit it. That is, if the High Seeker has left anyone alive in his dungeon by now." He gave Elsdon one of his claw-sharp smiles. "But certainly Layle Smith has gone mad again – the Queen has placed the Yclau palace in mourning, as she did last time. No less than a dozen of your loyal servants rushed to Vovim with this news, each not knowing of the others' coming. They began to arrive at the palace this morning, at dawn."

The King, grinning, looked over at Elsdon, still standing silent. "Well, Seeker?" he said. "Shall I send you back to the Eternal Dungeon so that you can bury your love-mate's ashes?"

"No, sire."

His voice felt hollow in his throat; his limbs were beginning to shake, and he feared that his knees would give way in the next moment. He tried not to think of this. He was a Seeker. Thoughts of his duty must come first.

The King's grin disappeared; his eyes narrowed. "No? You don't want to go back to Yclau after what has happened?"

"Sire . . ." It was a struggle to think, even to breathe. He gave up the effort to mold his words into courtly language and said simply, "I want more than anything to go back to the Eternal Dungeon, to find out— To help if I can. But my oath as a Seeker requires me to remain here, continuing my mission."

He did not see how the King reacted; his gaze was snagged by the High Master leaning forward. Elsdon had not taken full notice of the torturer's appearance upon their first meeting. Indeed, he had mistaken the man for a lowly courtier. Now, though, Elsdon found it hard to pull his eyes away. The High Master looked to be slightly older than the High Seeker, perhaps in his forties. His hair, in contradiction to Vovimian fashion for men, fell nearly to his waist; it was the color of rust. He had the high cheekbones common among some Vovimians, and pale skin.

And his grey eyes were, for a brief moment, as impenetrable as a rock.

Then the High Master shrugged, apparently turning aside from whatever thought had prompted this scrutiny of the junior Seeker. He moved his gaze to the King and cried, "Please don't let my prisoner go, sire – please! I'm planning such fun for him. He wants to show us how much worse Vovim's torturers are than Yclau's torturers – sorry, Yclau's *Seekers*." The sarcasm in his voice fairly flooded the room. "I can show him otherwise, sire. I can prove to him that Vovim's torturers are the best in the world."

The King reached over and ruffled the High Master's hair. "Of course you can, Milly," he said soothingly. "You're an excellent torturer – that's why I made you High Master. But perhaps you should turn the prisoner over to one of your torturers, hmm? We had trouble breaking this man last time, and I want to make sure that he undergoes the best treatment this time."

The High Master hung his head and thrust his lip out, then squealed again, slapping his palms upon the floor in excitement. "I know, sire! I know what will hurt him!"

As the King looked down with the amusement of a father watching his son at play, the High Master retrieved from the floor his abandoned wine glass.

He swirled the red liquid in it for a moment, holding the glass up to catch the sun's rays, which were beginning to slant into dusk. Then he picked up the book still lying open on his lap, lifted it into the air, and held the glass above it. Directing another biting smile at Elsdon, he began slowly to tip the wine-filled glass.

From behind Elsdon came a cough. "High Master," said a voice that Elsdon recognized as belonging to one of the High Master's personal guards, who had escorted Elsdon to this room.

"I'm bu-u-usy," said the High Master in a sing-song voice, without lifting his eyes from the drama of the wine glass.

"Excuse me, High Master, but—"

The High Master sighed and looked up at the King. "He won't listen to me. None of them will listen to me. Why won't my men obey me?"

The King smiled but did not pet his High Master this time; he was watching, enthralled, as the wine neared the point of its fall. "What do you want?" he asked, without looking at the guard.

"Sire, Master Toler is waiting outside."

The wine glass crashed to the floor.

The wine did not touch the book as it fell. The High Master's hand had jerked at the last moment, causing the glass to smash at the King's feet, scattering shards and liquid all over the regal cloak. The King squeaked with disgust, raising his feet to avoid the liquid rolling about the ground.

The High Master took no notice. "Toler?" he said abruptly to the guard. "Toler Forge?"

"I don't know, High Master – he only gave his name of masterhood. He says that he is passing through these parts and will not be able to stay for long. He says that if you wish to give him any message before he leaves —"

"Milly!" cried the King, placing his booted heels on the throne in an attempt to avoid the mess. "Milly, it's all messy here! I want it cleaned!"

"Of course, sire." The High Master sprang to his feet in a movement quicker than he had shown until that time. "I'll check to see whether any cleaning servants are in the hallway."

He moved past Elsdon, who resisted the temptation to look backwards to check whether the newcomer could be seen through the doors. His greater concern was being left alone with the King.

"I have *glass* all over my cloak!" cried the King, looking at the guard nearest him. "Do something!"

With clear reluctance, the guard moved forward and tried to push the glass away with the tip of his bayonet. A moment later, there was a ripping sound as the tail of the cloak fell to the floor.

"Idiot!" cried the King, slapping him back. "Brains of an Yclau! You'll die between horses for this! Do you hear that?" he asked the other guard. "He's to die between horses."

"Yes, sire," said the second guard in a colorless voice. The first guard stepped back into his original place; his hands were white-knuckled around the rifle as he resumed his stiff stance.

The King looked around for further help. Unfortunately, the first person he saw was Elsdon.

"You!" he said. "Pick up those pieces of glass! Now!"

"Sire," Elsdon said, in a voice that had calmed many a hysterical prisoner, "I'd like to help, but as my hands are bound behind my back—"

"Don't you refuse me!" The King scrambled onto his feet, teetering atop the throne as though he were a small boy balancing himself on a log. "How dare you refuse me! You'll die between the horses too! Slowly! After you've been skinned alive!"

Elsdon felt his mouth dry in an instant. He knew that, in this land, such threats were not exaggerated imagery. "Sire—"

The word choked in his mouth as a blow across his back sent him to his knees.

Behind him a cold voice, speaking in a thick provincial accent, said, "When the King gives an order, you do not argue with him. Obey."

He could not breathe. The blow had nearly driven him flat onto the ground. After a moment he managed to choke out, "How—?"

A second blow sent his face to the ground, inches from the glass. The cold voice said, "With your mouth, swine. That's all your mouth is good for."

He managed to pick his head off the floor, though he was trembling so hard that he was sure he would lose consciousness in the next moment. With what little wits he had left, he searched the ground with his eyes until he found a large shard of glass within reach. Carefully, he bent down.

He managed to lift the pointed edge of it with his teeth; then he twisted his torso in order to place the glass equally carefully on the ground next to him. Beside him, he heard a loud sigh.

"This will take *forever!"* cried the High Master. "Sire, permit me." He flounced down onto the ground and, ignoring the glass, he began using the loose end of his shirt to wipe up the wine.

The King took no notice of him; he was staring over Elsdon's head. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Oh!" The High Master looked up from his task, his face brightening. "I forgot introductions! Sire, with your permission, I'd like to present Master Toler, who is the finest torturer ever to have passed through the Hidden Dungeon."

The King snorted. "I thought the High Seeker claimed that honor."

"Oh, he *claims* it . . ." The High Master smiled as he bent toward the floor again.

From behind Elsdon, the cold voice said, "It is an honor to meet you, sire – many is the day when I wished I had been able to enter your presence. I had not thought to receive such grace during my brief visit through this part of your kingdom."

"I don't know you," was the King's reply to this courteous speech. "Why don't I know him, Milly? If he's the best torturer in Vovim – which means

he's the best torturer in the world – then he ought still to be working in my dungeon!"

The High Master, perhaps wisely, used this moment to rub his nose. The fact that the cloth he used was the wine-drenched shirt-tail appeared not to bother him. The cold voice said, "Your graciousness is as high as that of your father, sire. Some years ago, my father died; since I was my father's only son, your majestic father ordered me to return to my home, so that I could protect and support my mother and sisters. Since that time, I have worked in one of your provincial prisons. It is a smaller role than I had planned to take in my life, but I content myself with the knowledge that I am following the wishes of your father."

"Oh." The King appeared to be satisfied by this explanation. He was still standing atop the throne. Now, as his High Master finished wiping up the mess, the King sat down again, but he left his heels upon the chair, squeezing his legs tight to his chest as though he were six rather than twenty-six.

"I hope that you will forgive me for my boldness in correcting a prisoner before obtaining your leave, sire," the master torturer said. "I could not bear to hear a barbarian address you in such a fashion."

The King waved his hand in a careless manner. "You have my leave to punish him in whatever manner you wish. He has been difficult since he entered into my presence – isn't that right, Milly?"

"Most difficult, sire," said the High Master as he returned his attention to the abandoned platter, picking glass out of it. "He is much in need of the hand of an experienced torturer such as Master Toler."

"Thank you, High Master. You are most gracious, sire. . . . Up, swine."

The increased coldness of the master torturer's voice sent chills into Elsdon's stomach. He scrambled to his feet; then, fearing what he would see, he turned his head to look at the torturer standing beside him.

The man was dressed formally, in the manner of Vovimian torturers: boots tipped with steel, tight black trousers, and an equally tight black shirt whose sleeves were tied above the elbows. His left hip was empty of any

weapon, but in his right hand – Elsdon noted without surprise – was a sleek whip. Flung back over his shoulders was an elegant cloak of dusk blue, while at his throat was the only informal touch, a torque with rustic carvings of sharp blades and, in the center, a bound, writhing prisoner.

He looked much like the torturers Elsdon had seen in the Hidden Dungeon three years before, except for two things: his gloves were made of leather rather than chain-mail, and his face was covered entirely with a veil of black gauze, hiding all but the dimmest impression of his features.

The King, catching up with the obvious, appeared to notice this at the same moment. He asked sharply, "Why do you wear the veil of the prophets?"

"I will gladly remove it if it offends you, sire," Master Toler replied. He had not looked in the direction of Elsdon since the junior Seeker had risen to his feet; his face was turned toward the King. "Under ordinary circumstances I am not permitted to open my veil except in the moments before I perform executions. It is a long custom of the torturers in my province to garb ourselves like the prophets, as a sign that we serve the torture-god, whose earthly representative is yourself."

The King wriggled with pleasure at this statement, but he continued to frown, saying, "I'm not sure I like it. It looks too much like those hoods that Seekers wear."

"Of course it does, sire." Master Toler, without making his voice any warmer, somehow managed to convey a light tone. "How could it not, since they stole the idea from us?"

His statement caused a murmur to dance amidst the guards, who until this point had been eyeing the master torturer's whip suspiciously. Apparently they were not accustomed to permitting armed men into this room. Only the High Master seemed unsurprised by – or perhaps uninterested in – Master Toler's statement. He had returned to nibbling from the platter.

The King leaned forward enthusiastically, crossing his legs. "Have they stolen other things from us?"

"Sire, I needn't remind you who masters the Eternal Dungeon. How could a man like that – an oath-breaker to his King, a traitor to his kingdom – resist the temptation to steal? Yclau has always stolen from Vovim, but the High Seeker has increased this custom tenfold. As this prisoner" – he turned his face toward Elsdon at last – "no doubt knows."

"He's the High Seeker's love-mate," the King explained, as though avid to exchange gossip with the master torturer.

"Ah. Well, then, no doubt he has encouraged the High Seeker to commit his thefts. The arrogance of the Yclau knows no bounds."

The High Master looked up from the platter then, saying, "I'm not sure that the Yclau are the most arrogant persons in the world. I believe that honor goes to Layle Smith."

"He made me look a fool!" Without warning, the King was screaming again. Even the High Master winced this time at the sound of this siren.

Master Toler, though, appeared to take the change of mood in stride. "I have heard of that unhappy episode," he said. "Your patience with the Yclau after such wickedness is most remarkable."

"You talk about the Yclau again," complained the High Master. "But it is Layle Smith who affronted the King! The man's crimes are too countless to number: he offers his services to an enemy ruler, he speaks ill words against the Hidden Dungeon, he murders one of my torturers—"

"What?" The King's scream was higher-pitched this time; Elsdon saw the windows of the throne room vibrate. "When did this happen? Who was murdered?"

The High Master looked as though he would have liked to have gulped his words back. But showing more resolution than he had up till this time, he said, "It was the man who tortured Taylor three years ago. You had ordered his execution in any case, since he was thought to be responsible for the kidnapping, so I didn't think—"

"You didn't think!" The King was on his feet now, kicking the High Master. *"You didn't think to tell me Layle Smith had murdered one of my torturers? Villain! Traitor!"*

The King's foremost guard, clearly relieved that this episode was distracting the King from memories of a cut cloak, beckoned to a pair of guards standing by the wall; they stepped forward. At that moment, though, the High Master flung himself prostrate on the ground, wrapped his arms around the King's ankles, and began sobbing hysterically.

"Kill me, sire!" he begged. "Have my body torn apart by your royal horses! I have failed you, I have failed you, I deserve the worst and most painful death—"

Several of the guards snickered. The remainder stared down at the grovelling High Master with contempt clear in their expressions. The King, after trying several emotions upon his face, settled for condescension. He reached down and patted the High Master on the head.

"There, there," he said to the snivelling man. "I know that you meant well, Milly. I forgive you. Now, sit up straight – you want to make a good impression on Master Toler."

The High Master slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. The King, with a gesture meant to convey graciousness, indicated that he could have the privilege of laying his head upon the royal lap. The High Master did so, placing his arms around the King's legs, as though seeking continued support. He turned his head, and in his face was a blankness, as though he were indeed awaiting Master Toler's judgment.

Master Toler did not disappoint him. "The great have no need to go out of their way to adopt dignified poses, sire," he said. "Their dignity lies in the work that they do, and your High Master is a supreme example of that."

Several of the guards snickered at this backhanded compliment, but the faintest of smiles appeared on the High Master's face. When he spoke, though, his voice was peevish. "I should have killed him," he said. "I should have been there to protect the man Layle Smith murdered, and I should have killed the High Seeker. The man who was murdered had trained me, you see," he explained to the King, raising his head.

The King stroked the High Master's hair without commenting. It was Master Toler who said, "A worthy thought, High Master. Any man who would betray his master – as Layle Smith did by murdering your torturer –

deserves death a thousand times over. If the High Seeker were in my hands, I would make him realize that."

"Would you?" asked the High Master in a soft voice, like a child begging a treat.

"I would. Of course, if the man had a conscience, there would be no need for action on my part – the flaying of guilt is greater than any flaying performed by a torturer. But since the man is cold of heart, it is unlikely that any words spoken by a Vovimian could reach him."

The High Master closed his eyes, as though contemplating this information. Or perhaps it was simply time for his afternoon nap. The King yawned, apparently of the same mind; then his eye strayed over to Elsdon, who had been trying his best to glimpse through the veil whether Master Toler's eyes were as cold as his voice.

"What about him?" the King asked. "He should be punished. For his arrogance. And for stealing something. He stole something, didn't he?" He prodded the head of the High Master, who looked up at him with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Certainly the Yclau have stolen something," said Master Toler. "They have stolen something invaluable to you, sire, and have presented it to the world as their own. They have received praise for what you alone ought to receive praise for. They have stolen your fame and your honor."

"Have they really?" This news clearly delighted the King. "What have they stolen? Can we get it back?"

"In a sense, we have never truly lost what they took, though it is in my province that the treasure Layle Smith stole is best known. High Master, if I might have your permission . . ." He inclined his head toward the man curled around the feet of the King. The High Master nodded, looking somewhat more interested than before.

"What are you going to do?" asked the King, thumping the arms of his throne in his enthusiasm.

"What you most desire, sire. I am going to torture the prisoner. And thereby I will show what treasure the Yclau barbarians have stolen from

us." He turned his face toward Elsdon, and Elsdon felt the chill enter his heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Though the Code forbade Seekers all private belongings, long-standing custom permitted them a small allowance for luxuries. The High Seeker, being Vovimian-born, spent most of his allowance on books and art, and one evening in autumn, while the rain beat upon the crystalline rock that shed the only light into the underground Eternal Dungeon, the High Seeker had shown his love-mate an etching of a Vovimian theater company in performance. For the next two hours, Elsdon had listened with fascination to the talk of stage scenery and costumes, of introductory mimes and dramatic dialogues, of divisions into acts, of conflicts, climaxes, and finales, and (since this was, after all, a Vovimian theater) of bloody corpses on the stage afterwards, and of the theater companies' decision whether to fake the deaths or use criminal volunteers who had decided to let their execution be a final act of theater.

"But don't the condemned criminals panic at the last moment and spoil the show?" Elsdon had asked.

The High Seeker had bestowed upon Elsdon that look he often gave when they were discussing his native land, as though a lifetime of words could not complete Elsdon's education in this matter. All he said, though, was, "Not in Vovim."

Elsdon had spent the following night dreaming that he was watching a play in Vovim, performed by the world's finest players. For the next few weeks, his thoughts had lingered upon the regret that he would never have the opportunity to watch a Vovimian theater performance – not unless luck turned his way.

Luck, unfortunately, had turned his way. Amidst all his past dreamings, it had not occurred to Elsdon that he might take part in the performance himself, and that he would play the role of the criminal.

It was perhaps not surprising to learn that the King's palace was equipped with a theater, nor that the theater was located directly across the hallway from the throne room. Nor was it particularly surprising to learn that all of the courtiers and palace guests who had been milling about in the hallway, waiting for the King to emerge from his private audience with his High Master, were delighted to accept the King's invitation to enjoy the

performance. They crowded into the vast theater, jostled their way into cramped rows, and stood on benches at the back and sides of the theater in order to get their best glimpse of the stage.

The stage itself had been stripped to the bare minimum, making a striking contrast with the fripperies and frills that usually adorned a royal performance. At Master Toler's orders, the only scenery left on the stage was a blood-red curtain, which would make for an arresting contrast with both the master torturer's uniform and the prisoner's lack of clothes. The middle part of the curtain had been pulled up to reveal the naked stone wall behind, and here a wooden post had been fastened to the stage floor. Attached to it halfway up was a set of iron chains, which sparkled under the lamps. The other lamps in the room shone their light on the stage, or on the narrow walkway leading from the theater door to the stage.

Elsdon made his entrance down this walkway. He was not permitted to walk.

"Crawl," said Master Toler.

Elsdon stared at him. They were alone now in the throne room, though an occasional guard poked his head in to see whether Master Toler needed any assistance with the other player in this performance. The room had grown dim with twilight.

Elsdon waited too long. With a movement too quick to see, Master Toler used his whip to send Elsdon to his knees. "Crawl," he said in the flat voice a man might use toward a stubborn animal.

Elsdon's hands were still manacled behind his back. He was quite sure the master torturer had not forgotten this. Hesitantly he shuffled forward on his shins, keeping his head bowed, less for the sake of appearances than in order to avoid the remaining glass on the ground.

It took him a quarter of an hour to reach the entrance to the theater. He was watched most of the way by the spillover crowd in the hallway. The onlookers murmured to one another, as Vovimians do during the opening mime. Three or four reached out to touch Master Toler, seeking the blessing of the gods' favored, who had been permitted by the King to undertake the sacred task of play-acting.

Elsdon did not notice how the master torturer reacted to these touches; he was concentrating on not collapsing in exhaustion. All that could be said of this exercise was that it took his mind off the manacles, but even this gift seemed to fade as his knees grew bloody from rubbing upon the tiles, and his legs began to ache hard.

He had made his way halfway down the spectator-lined walkway, and was trying to decide whether play-actors were permitted to whimper, when Master Toler stopped him by cracking the whip a sheer inch from his face. "On your belly, swine," said the master torturer in his deep-pitched voice.

That was how Elsdon made the rest of the journey: desperately wriggling his way forward, like a fish on dry land. He managed to hold his groin up high enough to keep from scraping the most delicate parts of him, but this only increased the pressure on his face and shoulders. By the time he reached the stage, his face was dark with dust, except where tears had trailed their way down, escaping Elsdon's control.

Master Toler let him walk the rest of the way to the post. The master torturer had not yet touched Elsdon, nor did he do so while passing the post's chain through the links joining the manacles. He stepped back from this chore, took off his cloak, and tossed it up to the top of the post.

It fell perfectly, draping down as a backdrop for the prisoner. There was light applause – mere tapping of the feet – and then came the sound of shifting upon the floor as the Vovimians settled down for the play.

Elsdon looked past the stage lamps to where the King sat in the front row. He was the only spectator sitting on a chair. The High Master, as before, had taken his place at the King's feet, and the King was feeding him what looked like candies. It was the most royal act he had undertaken since Elsdon had met him.

Master Toler made no preliminary speeches. "Turn round," he told Elsdon.

Elsdon twisted to look behind him. The chain was quite loose, enough to take him several paces away from the post. He turned his body, and there was a murmur of approval as the audience caught sight of his manacles and chain. A few of the women began cooing and whispering remarks

about Elsdon's beauty, debating which part of him was most lovely. Elsdon felt his face grow warm.

He pressed himself against the flat post, whose hardness was softened by the thick cloak. He could guess what was coming next; he did not even need to hear the whistle of air to know that the blow was about to land.

The blow was followed by another; it fell, as had all the others, upon the fleshy part of his upper back. He caught part of the cloak into his mouth in order to cushion his teeth, which were now clenched tight together. He knew that he had the strength to withstand a beating for long periods. The trouble was, the torturer standing beside him undoubtedly knew this as well. He wondered how long the beating would last before he fainted.

Then the beating was over. There had been only five lashes in all; he heard the mutter of surprise from the audience, overridden by the King's loud query, "Why's he stopping?" The sing-song voice of the High Master murmured something in reply that must have satisfied the King, for when Elsdon turned back at Master Toler's order, he saw that the King was feeding candies to his High Master again.

"Now," said Master Toler to Elsdon, "you understand that I could continue?"

Elsdon nodded, and was rewarded by a slap. The slap was hard enough to drive his body back against the post; his only thought as his head swam from the pain was relief that the master torturer was wearing gloves better suited for holding a whip. If he had been wearing chain-mail, such a slap could have killed Elsdon.

"This is not a mime, swine." Master Toler's voice was still flat, as though he were an animal trainer. "I asked you a question. Answer me."

"Yes, si— Yes, master. I understand that you could continue beating me."

"Do you understand that I have the power to torture you in every other way? To burn you with irons? To tear off your nails? To place boiling water in your stomach or stinging insects in your private parts?"

Elsdon leaned against the post in an attempt to stay upright. "Yes, master," he whispered.

The next slap took him awares. He let his body go limp long enough to absorb the shock, and then concentrated all his effort on not falling to the floor. The women were beginning to coo again; the men were growling with evident enjoyment of this performance. The King was saying, "I must have him back at my dungeon! Do you hear me, Milly?"

"This . . . is not . . . a mime," Master Toler said in an exaggerated manner. "Answer my question clearly."

"Yes, master. I understand that you can torture me in any way you wish."

"And you are powerless to stop me, aren't you, swine?"

"Yes, master."

"Dear me." For a moment, the master torturer's voice was as light as the High Master's. "And here I thought the Yclau were all-knowledgeable and all-powerful."

For a moment, the theater was silent, except for the whispers of the palace children, sitting in the front row. Then the spectators fully absorbed this change from tragedy to comedy, and laughter sprang up from the audience. The King was stamping one of his feet enthusiastically; the High Master simply smiled. His gaze was fixed, not on Master Toler, but on Elsdon.

Master Toler waited for the laughter to die down, and then said, "I can make this hard for you, you know."

"Yes, master." He could not raise his voice above a whisper; he could feel the manacles biting into his wrists.

The master torturer did not slap him this time. Instead, he added, "Or I could make this easy for you."

Elsdon's breath froze in his throat. A whisper passed through the crowd, like wind across grass. The King leaned forward, frowning.

"I can break you by brute force," Master Toler said. "Such a breaking would be sloppy, inartistic – in no way worthy of the refined tastes of our audience."

The whisper turned to an approving murmur; the King nodded vigorously. The High Master's smile had slid into amusement, as though he were continuing to watch a comedy.

"I can break you that way," said Master Toler, "or I can break you with the artist's touch – with the skill of a craftsman, through rule and measure rather than in measureless chaos. Which would you prefer, swine?"

Elsdon felt the audience's anticipation in the silence that had fallen upon the theater. Even the crowd in the hallway had gone still. He knew what Master Toler wanted him to say, but even if he had not, he knew what the crowd wanted him to say. He was surprised to realize that his answer was as much influenced by the latter as by the former.

"Whichever would allow me to play my role best, master."

The thudding of feet startled him; he was even more startled to realize that the applause was for him. He stared around the crowd. Some of the men were growling again, and their growling was evidently not out of desire for his blood.

"Good," Master Toler said briskly. "That will make our performances in union with one another. What is your name, player?"

He felt his breath catch once more as he passed through the first turning point in the play. "My name is Elsdon Taylor, master."

"Taylor. Mr. Taylor." The master torturer's voice took on a tone of faint mockery. "That is how you are addressed at home?"

"Yes, master."

"Well, then, we must follow your custom, since the Yclau are notoriously bad at learning to follow other people's customs."

To his surprise, there was no laughter this time, simply nods and exchanged looks. The King yawned, and for a moment it looked as though he would fall asleep, but the High Master poked him and opened his mouth wide. The King leaned forward and placed another candy in it. A titter of amusement came from the people sitting nearest to the King.

"These are the rules we play by, Mr. Taylor," said the master torturer. "You violate them at your peril. You will reply to every question I ask you. You will reply with truth. You will listen carefully to all the questions I ask, and you will not defy me in any way."

"Yes, master." He felt an easiness enter him at the familiarity of this. If it had not been for the manacles binding his wrists, he might have been able to imagine that this was a day like any other day.

Master Toler paused a moment. With his cloak off, it could be seen that his body was lean rather than muscular – the body of a dancer rather than of a heavy laborer. In the bright light of the stage-lamps, his facial features showed more clearly through the veil: a mouth set grimly, eyes that were dark in color rather than light. Still, though, Elsdon could not tell what expression the eyes held.

"Why did you come to Vovim?" The question was as quick as a lash. Elsdon could tell that their audience was awaiting his answer with still breath.

"We heard in the Eternal Dungeon that the King of Vovim had—" He hesitated, but Master Toler's eyes were upon him, so he said, "We heard that the King had reneged on his promise to reform Vovim's dungeon and prisons. I came here to teach the King and his people about the *Code of Seeking*, so that they would know how to improve their prison system."

He could not have said more if he had wanted; his closing words were swallowed up in a roar as the audience surged to its feet, like a wave in the moments before a beach is destroyed. In the front row, the King was screaming, "Kill him! Kill him now!"

The High Master's face was dark with anger, but he said nothing; his gaze had switched to Master Toler.

Master Toler raised his hand. Such was the power he had established in this place that the audience began to subside almost immediately. He waited until the spectators were settled back down in their places and the shouts had turned to murmurs before he asked Elsdon, "What crime have you committed?"

"Master, I have committed no crimes."

Growling began in the audience, of an unfriendly sort. It was clear that Elsdon had lost whatever sympathy the spectators had held for him before. Master Toler said nothing; he simply looked at Elsdon silently with his dark eyes.

Elsdon said, somewhat desperately, "Master, I can't answer your questions if you ask me the wrong ones! If you—"

"Turn."

The coldness of Master Toler's voice was like a blast of icy air upon the heated crowd. There was instant silence. Elsdon turned slowly to face the post; he could feel that he was beginning to shake. He kept his eyes fixed on the master torturer.

"Now," said Master Toler, so softly that the audience leaned forward as one in order to hear him, "do you understand why I am punishing you?"

Elsdon swallowed in an attempt to clear the dryness in his throat. "Yes, master. I failed to show respect to you."

"You defied me," Master Toler clarified, perhaps for the sake of the slower-witted members of the audience. "Do you accept this punishment as just?"

"Yes, master."

"Good." Master Toler drew back his arm.

It was true that Elsdon had the ability to withstand long torture, provided that it was not the wrong kind of torture. But his day had been lengthy, and this was the fourth time he had received a beating. By the end of the third lash, he felt his legs begin to give way. Only Master Toler's sudden, tight grip on his elbow saved him from sliding to the floor. Behind him, the audience was utterly mute; the loudest sound was Elsdon's suppressed sobs, muffled against the post.

For a moment the scene was still, a tableau freezing the action in the play. Then Master Toler released him. Elsdon pressed himself against the post, having received no order to turn. It was the first time Master Toler had

touched him, other than to slap him. He could feel the master torturer's touch burning his skin.

From beside him, Master Toler said, "My fellow player requires a moment of respite, so I will take this opportunity to explain the nature of the drama tonight. . . . . You all know what crime this man has committed."

There was a murmur of agreement, punctuated by the King saying, "Milly? What is he talking about?" This was followed by the High Master's voice, too low to be heard. Then, "Oh!" said the King, with evident pleasure.

Master Toler took no notice of the interruption. "You know what crime he has committed, but he is an Yclau, ignorant of his offense. Where he comes from, such misdeeds are so common as to go unnoticed. So I will guide him, through my questions, to knowledge of what he has done, and along the way, if I am not mistaken, we will learn that his malefaction is not isolated, but is instead part of a larger pattern of deeds that offend the gods."

Elsdon had forgotten about the sharp pain of the lash, had forgotten even about the bindings at his wrists. He was staring at the master torturer, trying to ascertain whether this was some new form of deception or whether Master Toler had spoken truthfully of a horror to come.

The master torturer flicked his hand at Elsdon, who turned round to face the crowd in obedience to the gesture, slower than before. His heart was beating him as hard as the lash had.

"Since you seem incapable of following my instruction to listen carefully to my questions," the master torturer said with a light irony that raised laughter from the audience, "I will rephrase my question. What crime have you committed in your lifetime?"

Elsdon took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Four years ago I committed a murder, master."

"Indeed." Master Toler sounded unsurprised. "And what was the cause of the murder? Anger? Jealousy? Lust?"

"I . . . There were a number of causes, master. But my primary fault lay in my unwillingness to acknowledge to myself that I had the capacity to

murder. And also that I allowed myself, in my pride, to think that I could resolve the problems in my life in this way."

"Thoughtlessness. Arrogance. Those were the roots of your crime?"

"Yes, master."

"You acknowledge that."

"Yes, master. From the time I gave my confession, I have always been honest about what I did."

"Really?" The master torturer sounded so skeptical that several of the listening children giggled. "Well, Mr. Taylor, if you are as honest with yourself as you claim, the rest of this performance should travel as trimly as a well-crafted boat. Were you judged by the authorities for your crime?"

"Yes, master." Elsdon tensed in expectation of the questions about the nature of his crime.

Master Toler, though, asked only, "What punishment were you given?"

"Eternal confinement in the Eternal Dungeon."

A moment later he flinched, realizing that he had not addressed Master Toler formally, but the master torturer had evidently reached the stage where his mind was on the substance of the searching rather than the form. "The Eternal Dungeon. That is where you work as a Seeker now?" he asked.

Elsdon nodded. Master Toler leaned toward him, saying, "Those who run the dungeon must trust you greatly, if they permit you the freedom to remain unbound – the freedom even to hold power over others."

"Yes, master. I know that I have received fortune I do not deserve."

In the audience, a number of the men were beginning to nod their heads; the women had begun their cooing again. The King yawned.

"You say that you were eternally confined within the Eternal Dungeon. Yet you have left the dungeon, haven't you?"

He felt the words like the pricking of a torturer's dagger, warning of an upcoming flaying. With a halting voice, he said, "Yes, master. I . . . I have left the dungeon three times since my arrival there."

"The first time was on your previous visit to Vovim?" Master Toler waited only long enough for Elsdon to nod, then asked, "How is it that you were allowed to leave the dungeon then?"

"I carried a message from my Queen. She gave me permission to leave the Eternal Dungeon, for the duration of my mission."

"And the second time . . ."

"It was for an urgent family matter." He felt Master Toler's gaze upon him, heavy like a stone upon the chest, and he added, "The Codifier – the man who supervises the ethical conduct of the Eternal Dungeon – gave me permission on that occasion."

"And he had the power to give you permission because . . ."

"My confinement is regulated by the Code, master. I am bound to the Eternal Dungeon, not only by the sentence given to me by the Queen's magistrates, but also by my oath as a Seeker."

"I see." The master torturer's voice was light. "And who granted you permission to leave the Eternal Dungeon on this third occasion? —Raise your voice, Mr. Taylor," he added, though Elsdon had not yet opened his mouth. "I believe that some of the members of our audience are having difficulty in hearing you."

He did his best to follow the order, but his voice emerged as a squeak. "No one."

The King, who had been on the point of nodding off, jerked awake as the High Master gripped his leg tightly. A rumble like an incipient earthquake had begun in the audience. In the hallway, several people were shouting the news to those who had been unable to hear.

"No one?" No sign of surprise lay beneath the heavy mockery of Master Toler's voice. "No one in Yclau gave you permission to leave the Eternal Dungeon and come here?"

"I . . ." It was becoming hard to breathe; he had to make a second try at speaking. "I asked the High Seeker's permission."

"Oh, I see." Master Toler folded his arms without loosening his grip on his whip. "And *he* granted you his permission."

"No, master," Elsdon said breathlessly. "He – he thought it would be too dangerous a mission for me. Because of what happened last time I visited Vovim."

"Let me see whether I understand you." Master Toler raised his voice above the rising murmur of the crowd. "Your High Seeker forbade you to leave the Eternal Dungeon, your Codifier did not offer you release from the dungeon, and your Queen, presumably, knew nothing about this. Have I understood you correctly?"

Elsdon gave up the effort to speak; he nodded.

"Mr. Taylor." Master Toler's voice was so soft that the audience was forced to hush itself in order to listen. "You appear to have all the signs of being an intelligent young man. I assume that you had a reason for breaking the rules placed upon you by your workmasters, for defying the wishes of your monarch, and for violating the trust given to you by those who had shown you mercy after you committed a vile act. I would be most interested in hearing what that reason is."

Elsdon squeezed his manacled hands together tightly. He tried to speak steadily, as a Seeker should. "Master, my highest loyalty is not to any man or woman, but to the Code. The Queen and Codifier and High Seeker all understand this – the Queen permits the Code to be used in her dungeon with the understanding that it will be the supreme guide for Seekers' consciences. And the Code is quite clear in stating that, if a Seeker's superior should try to force a Seeker to act in a manner that would violate the best interests of the prisoners, the Seeker must follow the Code rather than his superior."

Master Toler nodded. "So you sought to follow the Code by coming here."

"Yes, master. I thought I could help the Vovimian prisoners if I could persuade the King to adopt the *Code of Seeking* in his dungeon and

prisons."

"You knew that you might receive punishment from your own people for this act?"

"I was sure I would, master."

In the audience, the women were beginning to coo again; the men were watching Elsdon with sober eyes. The High Master's grey eyes were as blank as a cloudy day.

The King was fiddling with the candy in his lap and sighing.

"So you risked punishment in order to come here." No mockery could be heard in the master torturer's words. Then, like the sting of an unexpected lash, he added, "And have you been successful in your mission?"

Elsdon was left too breathless to speak. Nor did Master Toler give him time to do so; he rained down the questions hard, in short intervals. "Have you been successful in the past in such work? Are you trained in diplomacy? Have you learned the methods by which to make your words to high persons be a healing balm rather than a cause for war? Did you come here with any expectation whatsoever that you might fail in your mission, and did you think about the consequences for Yclau if you angered the King and his people?"

Elsdon bit his lip hard and shook his head.

"You did not think of the consequences for failure." Master Toler let the words drop like heavy irons upon him. "You did not think of what would happen to Yclau if, presenting yourself as a representative of the Queen's dungeon, you gave offense to the King. You did not think of what would happen to the Eternal Dungeon if your offense was so great that you were tortured and executed – you did not think of what your loss would mean for the prisoners awaiting you at home. Did you even think of what it would mean to the prisoners in this kingdom if you angered the King so greatly that he decided to take harsher measures against the prisoners than he had in the past?"

"No, master." He could scarcely keep his voice level now. "I didn't think __"

"You didn't think," Master Toler cut in. "You were thoughtless. And what else were you, Mr. Taylor?"

There was a short silence, and then Elsdon said in a small voice, "Arrogant."

Master Toler kept his gaze fixed upon Elsdon for a long moment. Then he turned to face the audience. On cue, the spectators stamped their feet, pleasure written across their faces. Master Toler gave them a brief bow. Elsdon resisted the odd impulse to do likewise.

A long pause followed. Elsdon guessed that, under ordinary circumstances, the stageworkers would have been scuttling about, changing the scenery for the next act. In the front row, several of the youngest children climbed into the laps of their mothers and promptly fell asleep. The King looked as though he would have liked to have joined them. The rest of the audience, though, remained wide-eyed.

Finally Master Toler turned to Elsdon and said, "You have confessed to committing one crime against the gods. Good. What other crime have you committed?"

"Master, I . . ." His eye was on the whip, which the master torturer continued to hold in hand. "I am not aware that I have committed any other crimes."

"Mr. Taylor," said Master Toler in a voice so soft that several of the women in the audience shivered visibly, "I would ask once again that you listen carefully to my questions. Have you committed any crime *against the gods*? Does nothing weigh upon your conscience?"

The audience leaned forward. Several of the children gulped in air and then waited, cheeks puffed, to prevent the sound of their breaths from obscuring the answer.

"Yes, master. Something weighs on my conscience."

Grumbles began in the back of the theater from those who were having difficulty hearing the dialogue. With a terse gesture, Master Toler indicated that Elsdon should speak louder. Elsdon found himself desperately wishing that he was performing in Yclau. The audience there

would be more inclined to lose interest, and the theater acoustics would be better. He said, "When I departed the Eternal Dungeon, I left no note for the High Seeker, telling him why I had left—"

"This is the High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon, your love-mate?" Master Toler's voice was pitched to carry out the door and into the hallway.

Elsdon felt the beginnings of a flush upon his face. That fact did not go unnoticed by the children, who giggled, nor by the women, who cooed once more. Elsdon said, with the start of panic tightening his chest, "I thought he would understand that I was leaving because I believed that the Code required it of me. But I learned today that the High Seeker has entered into illness. Master, I am responsible for that illness—"

"Turn."

The command caught the audience off-guard; several of the men frowned, and several of the women shook their heads. The King brightened and tossed three candies toward the High Master.

Master Toler waited until Elsdon was facing the post again, and then said, "Do you understand why I am punishing you?"

"Yes, master," Elsdon replied in a shaking voice. "I claimed a greater crime than I could be sure I had committed."

"Do you accept this punishment as just?"

Elsdon nodded. Master Toler said, "You were overzealous rather than intentionally deceptive. Your punishment will be less this time." Over the groan of disappointment from the King, Master Toler brought his whip down in one brief, burning lash, and then gestured to Elsdon to turn back.

Elsdon did so. His vision was swimming, but he could see that the men who had been frowning before were still frowning. Some of the women were actually dabbing at tears with their handkerchiefs.

Master Toler paused a moment, and then said, "You were speaking of the High Seeker's *madness*."

His voice contained so much sarcasm that several of the children giggled. Elsdon felt the flush spread to his ears. "Yes, master. I believe I may be

partly responsible for the High Seeker's ill health. He— My presence has been important to him for the past four years. He may believe that I left the dungeon, not out of duty, but because we quarrelled over whether I should go to Vovim. He may believe that I left him because I was angry at him, and my loss may have sent him into – into madness."

Master Toler's veiled eyes did not shift from Elsdon. "You are speaking of the High Seeker? The man who rescued you from Vovim the last time you were imprisoned here?"

"Yes, master. He risked his life to save me." Elsdon felt his throat closing.

"And you left no note for him? Did you leave a note for any other friend who might have been concerned for your welfare if it was discovered you were missing?"

"No, master." He felt the weight of those unshifting eyes and added, "It was thoughtless of me. And . . . and my act arose from arrogance. My mind was on myself rather than on those I left behind. If the High Seeker is truly mad—"

His voice was swallowed up by the sound of stamping, so loud that the stage vibrated under Elsdon's bare feet. Master Toler responded to the applause with another swift bow, and then glanced at Elsdon, who was standing motionless, staring at him as his Adam's apple worked up and down in his throat.

"You have confessed to two crimes," said Master Toler as the audience settled down for the third act. "That is two more crimes than you were willing to admit you had committed at the beginning of this play. Are you willing now to guess what crime you committed that so angered these good people?"

"I . . ." His throat was still tight. He wished, with hopeless despair, that he could clear the room of all the spectators and go down on his knees before the master torturer, receiving his judgment alone for what he had done. At least in the Eternal Dungeon, confessions were given without several hundred people listening.

"I would be willing to have you educate me on what I have done," Elsdon said finally.

"Indeed." Master Toler's voice was dense with skepticism. "You are willing to learn from me. How very unlike the Yclau."

There were a few scattered chuckles as the heat in Elsdon's face grew worse. Then Master Toler said, "Let us speculate here. Let us suppose that the two crimes you've confessed to had not been committed. In this supposing, you came here lawfully, as an ambassador for your Queen, trained in the arts of diplomacy. The High Seeker gave you his blessing for the journey; the Codifier granted his permission for you to leave the Eternal Dungeon. Under such circumstances, would you consider your mission to be in any way flawed?"

"No, master. I may have been the wrong person to undertake this mission, but I don't believe it was wrong for someone from Yclau to come here and teach the Vovimians how to reform their dungeon and prisons through the Code."

Like a dog on a tether, the audience growled. The King said loudly, "Milly, when will he torture him again?"

Master Toler's eye flicked over to the King; then he said, "Turn."

Elsdon stared at him blankly. Then he saw the master torturer's hand begin to rise and he quickly turned to face the post. His stomach churned from sudden sickness, and he squeezed his eyes shut. He no longer wanted to see what lay within those veiled eyes.

He heard a step beside him, and the ritual words were spoken. "Do you understand why I am punishing you?"

Elsdon shook his head. The voice continued as though there had been no break in the routine: "Do you accept this punishment as just?"

"No, master."

The audience's growling had stopped. The crowd waited, poised in anticipation for an unexpected change in the drama. Master Toler raised his voice. "I know, sire, that you and all other intelligent members of this

audience understand what has been occurring for the past minutes. If I had simply used brute force against my fellow player, he would not have been able to offer to me the confessions he did, for his awareness that he had committed these crimes lay deeper than surface thought. He offered his confessions freely because my questions forced him to confront what he had done, and also because he was secure in his knowledge that truth from him would be rewarded and lies would be punished.

"Now he believes that he is about to be punished for telling the truth. Believing that, he will no longer have incentive to answer my questions, and he will return to his previous obstinacy. I ask you, good onlookers: Shall I beat him? Or shall I continue with the searching?"

Phrased this way, there could be no doubt which answer the master torturer desired, but the audience entered into the spirit of the drama, crying out, "Search him, master! Search him! Search your fellow player!"

"Beat him!" screamed the King, oblivious to the consensus elsewhere in the theater.

Elsdon opened his eyes in time to see Master Toler bow in the direction of the King. "Your humor is famed throughout the world, sire. I would give much to see you perform in a comedy."

The King made no reply, evidently taking Master Toler's words as a compliment – and indeed, Elsdon guessed, such a statement *was* a compliment in Vovim. Master Toler gestured, and Elsdon slowly returned to his previous position. His stomach was still churning, but only because he guessed that this third act would be the worst.

"Tell me, Mr. Taylor," said Master Toler, "when you were in Vovim last, did you have the opportunity to speak about the Code to anyone?"

"Yes, master." Elsdon saw the King lean forward, frowning, and he hastily added, "I spoke of the Code only with my torturer, who later died. And . . . Well, I suppose I ended up learning as much from him as I sought to teach. He was a wise man."

"Really?" The master torturer's voice was light. "Does that fact prompt any additional thoughts in you?"

Elsdon shook his head, and Master Toler sighed. He glanced at the audience, whose members sighed in unison. Elsdon felt the bewilderment of someone who has not been told the meaning of a joke that everyone else understands. As far as he could tell, the King – whose brow was creased with concentration – was the only other person in the theater who failed to understand which direction Master Toler was headed in.

"Mr. Taylor," said the master torturer, "I would like you to reflect for a moment on the confessions you have offered. Think of what caused those crimes, and what the consequences of your crimes were. Think how far back the roots of your crime lie, and of what the consequences for your acts have been in the past. . . . You have thought on that? Good. Now, I trust that, being a Seeker, you have a good memory. I would like you to cast your mind back to the speech you gave at the beginning of this searching, and to repeat that speech again."

"I said that we'd heard the news that the King had . . . had decided not to institute certain reforms—"

"Mr. Taylor." The coldness of Master Toler's voice caused several of the children to clutch at each other. "I know that you have difficulty listening carefully to my instructions, so I will state them once more. You are to repeat what you said earlier. Not what you would say now, after two confessions. I wish you to say what you said before."

Elsdon licked his lips, which had turned dry. "I said that the King had reneged on his promise to introduce prison reform. I said that I had come here to teach the King and his people . . ."

His voice died away. Before him, the audience sat motionless. An Yclau theater audience would have shuffled or whispered during a pause in the action, but this audience was so perfectly trained that even the children did not wriggle. The High Master, from his position at the King's feet, showed no inclination to break the silence.

"Sweet blood," Elsdon whispered.

"You have a confession to offer, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon turned his gaze toward the master torturer. Master Toler had positioned himself to one side, allowing the lamps to center their light upon his fellow player. At no point in the performance had he obscured the audience's view of Elsdon; at no point had he sought to turn their attention away from Elsdon's words. He was a player in a supporting role; he had bound himself as much by the rules of theater as had the audience below.

Elsdon knew then what he must do. He would not have done it if he had been imprisoned in a cell of the Eternal Dungeon, speaking only to his Seeker and perhaps a guard or two. But he was standing on a stage in a kingdom famed for its theater, and he guessed what it was that Master Toler would have done, if he had been playing this role.

He sank to his knees and bowed his head. Without looking up to see how the audience reacted to this, he said, in a clear voice meant to reach into the hallway, "Sire, I would like to ask your forgiveness, and the forgiveness of the High Master and all others here who have heard my words. When I spoke earlier, on this stage and in private with you, I spoke with arrogance and thoughtlessness, presenting myself as a teacher who had nothing to learn from those I sought to teach. I . . . I still believe that the Code is a great work and worthy to be followed. But I see now that I have made the same mistake I made on my previous trip to Vovim, of believing that I had nothing to learn from those I spoke with here. This play . . . It could have been performed in Yclau, perhaps, but few of the Yclau would have understood its meaning. You in Vovim are far better at listening, and at learning from what you have heard, than anyone I have met in my own queendom."

After a moment, he raised his eyes high enough to see the audience. The people were motionless, as though they dared not break the silence after such words. Master Toler looked down upon him, as silent as the rest. The High Master's eyes had gone blank again.

"*Where's the punishment?*"

The King's shout spread murmurs through the audience, like ripples when a still pond has been unexpectedly jarred by a rock. Several of the men glared at the King.

The High Master jumped to his feet. "Oh, yes!" he said. "The prisoner has confessed, he must be punished! We could pull him up on weights like this —" He stood on tiptoe, raising his hands high above him. "Or we could strangle him—" He put his own hand to his throat, made strangling noises, and fell to the floor, his limbs jerking in spasms. "Or we could use the horses—" He stretched himself out spreadeagle, and began crying, "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

The audience's mood changed from anger to amusement; laughter swelled as the hapless High Master struggled to escape his invisible bonds. Even the King joined in the laughter, throwing candies onto his High Master.

Master Toler alone seemed incapable of recognizing the comedy. As the High Master finally sat up, brushing dust out of his hair, the master torturer said soberly, "Thank you, High Master; I appreciate your reminders of the possible consequences for ill deeds. And I thank you also, sire, for recognizing the needed finale to this play. But I will not be the one to supply the finale." His eyes turned toward Elsdon.

Immediately the audience was still once more. Even the King who, moments before, had been counting the remaining candies with a frown, showed interest in this concluding portion of the play. The master torturer said, "Mr. Taylor, under ordinary circumstances it is the torturer who decides the penalty for a prisoner's ill deed, following in conformity with the wishes of his King. You, however, have shown yourself capable of honesty beyond that which most prisoners are able to demonstrate." There were nods throughout the audience, and several of the women called out Elsdon's name. It was clear that, if nothing else, Elsdon's name would be remembered afterwards for his single role as a play-actor.

"Mr. Taylor," said Master Toler, in carefully spaced words, "our King, who is the supreme judge of crimes committed by persons who dwell in or visit this land, has heard your confessions and considers that you are deserving of punishment. *Full* punishment, I would guess – am I right, sire?" He turned to look at the King, who nodded energetically. "Full punishment," repeated the master torturer. "Not lesser punishment. Not mercy. You are to be given the full penalties of the law. Mr. Taylor, by your honor as a Seeker, tell me what punishment you would receive if your Queen considered you fully guilty of the crimes you have committed."

Elsdon looked at the crowd. Some of the children were now sitting on their hands in an evident effort to keep from wriggling with excitement. Most of the women had their handkerchiefs out and were holding those cloths against their mouths in anticipation of his reply. The men looked even more sober than they had at previous points in the drama.

Elsdon said, "For the third crime I committed, of failing to see how much I could learn from the Vovimians . . . I would receive little punishment for that. The High Seeker might reprimand me, but in Yclau we believe that honest mistakes are a source for learning and should not receive harsh punishment."

The audience's heads swivelled to look at Master Toler, as though doubting that he would accept this statement. The master torturer nodded, though. He said, "And the second crime?"

"The second crime, of causing anguish and perhaps even madness to those who care for me . . . I would receive no punishment for that. It will weigh on my conscience to the end of my life, but it is not a crime under Yclau law."

The audience began to frown. The King said loudly, "He's lying, isn't he, Milly? He's trying to avoid being punished." The High Master did not reply. His head was upon the King's lap again, and his gaze was once more fixed on Elsdon.

"That leaves us with the first crime," said Master Toler. "That crime would be judged by the Codifier, if I understood you correctly before?"

"Yes, master. The Codifier serves as magistrate to Seekers who break the Code. The High Seeker offers his recommendation for a sentence, and the Queen and her magistrates have oversight upon the judgment, but the Codifier is the one who issues the sentence, and his rulings are rarely overturned."

The King looked as though he were disposed to react to this speech by going to sleep. Only the restless movement of the High Master, raising his head from the King's lap, kept the monarch from missing the final lines of the play. The rest of the audience showed no inclination to lose interest.

They had grown tense, as though fearing that the beauty of the play was about to be spoiled by a player's willful refusal to play his part.

"Mr. Taylor, what sentence would you be given for leaving the Eternal Dungeon in violation of the Code, if you were judged fully guilty?" asked Master Toler.

Several of the women bit their knuckles in their anxiety. A few of the children began to cry, apparently fearing that the play would be ruined. The men exchanged shrugs with one another. If one performed a play with a foreign player, what else could one expect?

Not in Vovim. The High Seeker's words shot through Elsdon like a mortal blow. He had not understood the words then. He understood them now.

He turned his gaze to the master torturer, who was waiting in silence. The torturer's eyes remained veiled. In a voice as clear as that in which he had given his final confession, Elsdon said, "Death."

Master Toler's eyes closed. His whip slipped from his hand and landed upon the stage with a thud. He bowed his head, as though he were the one who had just entered into defeat.

Elsdon heard a rustling sound and turned his face back toward the crowd. He was not sure what to expect; he had never known much about Vovimian theater.

He remembered what the High Seeker had told him during their conversation over the etching. "What is the audience doing?" Elsdon had asked, pointing. "They look as though they're crawling toward the stage."

The High Seeker had given a snort of laughter. "They do, don't they? Vovimian religious rites look odd to outside observers."

"Religious rites?" responded Elsdon. "You said this was a theater perfor— Oh. This is part of the sacred nature of Vovimian theater, then? The people are performing a rite?"

"They are praying to the gods. To Mercy, if the protagonist of the play has received mercy; to the torture-god, if the protagonist has been condemned to death. You'd be unlikely to see this rite performed if you attended a

Vovimian play, though. It occurs only at the most sacred performances, when the audience believes that the play-acting has reached such heights that the players have truly transformed the stage into a dwelling for the gods."

On the royal stage of Vovim, a condemned criminal stood silent, looking down at his audience. He could not see the people's faces. All of the spectators – men, women, and children – were now on their forearms and shins, in the position of adoration before the gods. Even the High Master's head was bowed, though whether from piety or from sleepiness it was hard to tell, for his hair obscured his face.

In the hallway, where Elsdon could not be seen but had been heard, one of the young men raised his voice and began chanting the words of evening prayer.

Elsdon closed his eyes. He had faced death before, and he had thought then that he knew what an execution entailed: a brief, ugly hanging, with no witnesses other than family. In his case, as he was a kin-murderer, no one would have attended his execution except his Seeker. His Seeker, perhaps, might have mourned his passing; no one else would have.

Here his death, like the deaths of other condemned criminals before him, would bring grief to the hearts of a large number of strangers. The women who had cooed and wept no longer seemed odd and distasteful to him; they were acting in a manner natural to Vovimian theater-goers, caring deeply for the protagonist in his final moments. Yclau knew nothing of this method of bringing comfort and love to a condemned criminal. Only the Vovimians held this secret.

"Where's the treasure? I want to see the treasure!"

Master Toler raised his head. Even with the veil in place, the anger in his face was clear. All around the room, worshippers were rising slowly from their ritual positions, fury in their faces at this interruption to the sacred rite. Some of the men were beginning to bang their fists against their thighs. Clearly, if the King had been anyone less than who he was, his interruption would have caused the audience to sacrifice him to the gods.

The High Master looked for a moment as though he were going to leap to his feet and renew his capering performance. Master Toler, though, said in a brief, taut voice, "Do you wish me to speak of this matter in front of the others, sire?"

The King looked round, as though suddenly aware that the play had been performed for others beside himself. "No!" he said quickly. "I want to hear it alone. With my guards," he added.

"And me?" the High Master asked eagerly. "Please, sire, may I hear the secret also?"

The King chuckled and rumpled the High Master's hair. "Of course, Milly. I wouldn't close my door to you."

The audience left slowly, casting long looks behind them. Clearly they regretted not being able to stay with Elsdon during his final moments. Elsdon stood motionless for a while, watching them leave. Then, as the last rows began to depart, he spontaneously bowed.

This caused a final flurry of stamping, much more vigorous than any that had occurred before, and then the door was closed, and Elsdon was left alone with the King, his guards, the High Master, and the master torturer.

Master Toler waited until the voices in the hallway had faded in the distance. Then he said, "You have already seen the treasure, sire – it lay in our performance. The play we enacted tonight has been performed many times in Yclau. There it goes by the name of the Code, but that is only the Yclau's way of trying to pretend that they invented this method of breaking. In actual fact, this method of handling prisoners was invented by the Vovimians, and the King ought to be receiving the fame for this discovery that the world has given to the queendom of Yclau."

"That's all?" the King said in a disappointed voice. "All that talking you did – that's the missing treasure?" He looked over at the High Master. "Milly, what's special about what this torturer did? I don't understand."

The High Master looked up from where he had been playing with a piece of candy on the floor. "I believe, sire, that Master Toler has just

demonstrated to us a method by which prisoners can be broken with little use of physical torture."

"But my torturers can do that! Can't they?"

"Of course they can, sire," Master Toler said before the High Master could reply. "The man sitting next to you is more accomplished at that art than any other torturer I knew at the Hidden Dungeon. Much of what I performed tonight I learned from observing him at his work. I would not presume to teach the High Master on such a matter."

A catlike smile crept onto the High Master's face, and then was hidden as he bowed his head to look down at the candy.

"No, sire, breaking by means of words is still practiced in the Hidden Dungeon," Master Toler continued as he pulled his cloak from the post and placed it over his shoulders. "But the rest of what I did – using strict and measured rules by which to search the prisoner – has been forgotten in Vovim, except in my province. It was only by binding myself and the prisoner to such rules that I was able to break him in so swift and effective a manner. This the Yclau know, and this is why they have twisted the original Vovimian knowledge of the value of rules, called the results their 'Code,' and told the world that they are the greatest torturers in the world. If there is any truth to their claim of skill, however, it is only because they have stolen Vovimian treasure. If I were so bold as to advise you, sire, my counsel would be that you take back what is rightfully Vovim's, and show the world that the King's torturers know best how to break prisoners by rule and measure."

The King frowned, like a small child trying to make sense of a lesson. The High Master sighed, apparently because he was unable to find enough green candies to line up with red candies. "Sire, I'm sleepy," he said, looking up. "Could we finish the punishment now and decide about the rest of this later?"

"Oh, yes, the punishment." The King brightened. "I want eight horses used – all eight. I want to see his body torn asunder all at once!"

Elsdon pressed himself back against the post in a desperate attempt to stay upright. He looked over at Master Toler, but the master torturer seemed

disinclined to argue against the King's choice. The High Master rose to his feet and began bouncing up and down.

"Oh, yes!" he said as he clapped. "Yes, let's use all eight horses! And we can castrate the prisoner beforehand! Oh, sire, it will be so wonderful. It will only take four or five hours to ready the horses and their drivers and to gather an audience—"

"Four or five hours?" The King's face fell. "I don't want to wait that long for an execution. I want him to die now!"

"Certainly, sire," said Master Toler in a serene manner, scooping up his whip. "I can take care of that matter for you. So you would prefer that I perform the execution in private?"

The King appeared uncertain. He looked up at the High Master, who shrugged in a resigned manner. "Well, it would be nice if you could watch, sire. Master Toler is *so* skilled at strangling. But if it is not to be a public execution . . ."

"I do want to go to bed." The King looked over at Elsdon, who was now staring with wide eyes at the master torturer's hands. The King smiled. "All right, Master Toler; I'll let you exercise your skill. But you *must* tell me tomorrow how it went. I want to know every detail."

"Certainly, sire." Master Toler bowed, and then said to the High Master, "I will need a private place for the execution."

"Of *course*," said the High Master, leaping to his feet. "I know just the place for you. Oh, it is *so* exciting to see you at work again. I always liked the way you snap the bones of prisoners' necks. It makes such a nice crunching sound." And he skipped down the walkway as Master Toler gripped Elsdon's arm hard and pulled him, half-fainting, toward the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Where Vovim's dungeon was hidden that month Elsdon did not know; nor did he ever learn. The royal palace itself, he discovered, had a small dungeon, presumably a holding place for criminals destined for the High Master's home. It was far darker than the Hidden Dungeon.

They made their way mutely down the steps: first a palace page-boy carrying a lantern; then the High Master; then Elsdon, still gripped hard by Master Toler; and finally the High Master's personal guards, their bayonets occasionally pricking Elsdon in the back.

No one appeared to be in the palace dungeon – at least, no one who was still alive. They stopped finally at an iron door in the stone wall, and the High Master waved forward one of the guards, who opened the door. The page-boy, reaching up on tiptoe, hung a lantern from a hook on one of the cell walls. Then he emerged from the cell, casting admiring looks at the prisoner who had performed his part so well. Master Toler pushed his prisoner through the doorway so swiftly that the junior Seeker nearly fell to his knees. Elsdon caught a last glimpse of the High Master's simpering smile, and then the door closed, footsteps receded, and Elsdon was left alone with his torturer.

He turned slowly round to face the door; his heart was beating hard in his throat. The first thing he noticed was not Master Toler, but the carving above the door. He had seen prison art during his visit to the Hidden Dungeon, but not in his cell; the royal palace, it appeared, was especially well decorated. The scene in the carving was familiar.

To the far left were three figures in a row, bowing in adoration toward the right. Further to the right was a man in a chair, presumably the King or some other high official; his head was bowed toward the right. And then came the stage: upon it stood the supporting player, blade in hand, ready to strike. Below him was the main player, bound and writhing as he awaited his death.

Elsdon's gaze fell to the man standing in front of the closed door. His torturer was busy winding his whip into a circle and hooking it to his belt. This done, he removed his leather gloves and carefully placed them in his

cloak pocket. Only once these preliminaries were finished did he reach up and remove his veil.

His eyes were clear, and they glittered in the torchlight. Elsdon felt the breath go out of him. He moved forward blindly, his own eyes veiled with tears. "Layle," he whispered.

The High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon held him tenderly, without speaking, for a long moment. Elsdon could hear Layle Smith's blood beating hard through his neck. When Layle finally drew back from him, he spoke no words, but reached forward and pulled Elsdon's lips apart.

Elsdon let him probe the mouth, but when the fingers withdrew, he said, "The glass didn't cut me, love. I didn't dare let it. I wasn't sure how you'd react to the sight of my blood."

"You know how I would have reacted." The High Seeker's voice was taut. "And you know how long it would have taken me to forgive myself if I'd hurt your mouth. As it is . . ." He turned Elsdon round gently and began inspecting his back.

Elsdon gave a short laugh then. "Layle, you must be the only person in the world who could doubt your ability to land a whiplash in exactly the manner you'd planned. Of *course* you didn't break my skin. It was no worse than any beating I received while in training; stop fussing over me. I __"

He stopped abruptly as Layle's hands trickled down to his manacles. He held his breath, not doubting that the High Seeker could open the manacles with his hands alone. After a moment, though, Layle's hands withdrew, and Elsdon felt the High Seeker's cloak descend onto his shoulders.

Layle's arms travelled round to hold him as the High Seeker rested his chin on his junior Seeker's shoulder. Layle said softly, "The rest of you?"

"Just scrapes; they will heal quickly."

"Let me see." Layle kissed his bare neck, then came back round to the front and dropped down onto both knees to inspect Elsdon's shins. He frowned, saying, "These should be washed and bandaged soon, or they're likely to become infected."

Elsdon looked at the cell door. He could hear nothing outside the door; unless the High Master's guards were unusually quiet, nobody had been left behind. "Layle," he said hesitantly, "couldn't we just . . ."

Layle's gaze remained on Elsdon's legs. "We could. We might be able to manage to make it to the border. Is that what you want?"

Elsdon's gaze rose again to the bound prisoner in the carving, awaiting the blade. So large was the carving that Elsdon could see that the prisoner was smiling. Elsdon wriggled his wrists within the manacles, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"No," he said. "However foolish it was for me to come here, and however poor a player I've proven to be, I don't want to give up on this play until I'm sure it's a failure. I still have my mission."

Layle looked up at him; his eyes were smiling. "Our mission."

Elsdon smiled back at him, and then gave a short laugh. "It's a good thing nobody in that theater ever saw you searching a difficult prisoner in the Eternal Dungeon. They would have recognized the role you were performing."

The smile in Layle's eyes faded; he looked back down at Elsdon's legs. "I had to make some adjustments to my usual performance."

"Yes, I know. That must have been hard for you."

"No. As a matter of fact, it was all too easy."

Layle had not yet moved from his kneeling position, even though, by now, he must have finished inspecting Elsdon's legs. Elsdon knew that this could be no coincidence. He felt his throat tighten, and he instinctively tried to reach out to Layle. The manacles bit at his wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said finally.

"You've already made your apologies. In fact, I seem to recall that you've confessed three times over. I trust that you will allow me the same privilege."

"Layle, it's not your fault! It's my fault. After all these years during which you've resisted the temptation to abuse prisoners again, I put you in a position where you've been forced to act as a Vovimian torturer—"

Layle rose to his feet and took gentle hold of Elsdon's arms. "This trip has been good for me," he said firmly. "It helped me to remember why I left the Hidden Dungeon; I'm less likely in the future to become nostalgic about my time there. Now, we've both made our confessions and our apologies. Let's let the matter pass." He put his hand up to Elsdon's cheek.

Elsdon leaned into his touch and tried to put his hand out to cover Layle's. Once again the manacles bit into his wrists. He felt his breath cut short, and he had to close his eyes against the wave of nausea that travelled through him. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that the High Seeker was watching him with brows drawn low in concern.

"Layle," Elsdon said in a voice too near to panic for his liking, "can't you remove my manacles?"

"Not yet." Layle kissed him lightly on the cheek to soften the blow of his words. "That's the High Master's prerogative. It wouldn't be wise to anger him."

Elsdon's awareness of the binding faded as he thought through this response. After a while he said, "The High Master . . . He's good at play-acting."

Layle's mouth quirked. "I was wondering whether you'd noticed that. The King and the rest of the palace residents would undergo a shock if they ever saw the High Master at his work."

"That was how I guessed," said Elsdon. "If the High Master had really been what he appeared to be, he couldn't possibly have broken any prisoners. And he does know how to break prisoners – he was pulling me into pain through his words with as much skill as though he were a Seeker."

"He's a talented man. He's the only man I knew in the Hidden Dungeon who was truly dedicated to the art of torture."

"He's a dangerous man too, isn't he?"

"Very dangerous." Layle's voice was quiet. "Far more dangerous than the King. If nothing else, he has survived eight years in his title."

Elsdon raised his eyebrows in enquiry. The High Seeker added, "Being appointed High Master is the equivalent of a death sentence, Elsdon. If you refuse the honor, you are suspected of disloyalty and executed immediately. If you accept the honor . . . Well, Vovim's Kings have always rightly guessed that their closest rival in power is the head of their dungeon. This is true in Yclau as well, but the Queen has bound the torturers there through the Code. Here in Vovim, no binding exists to keep the torturers from gaining power at the King's expense, so the King purges his dungeon of suspected traitors at regular intervals. The High Master rarely lives more than one or two years."

"I see," Elsdon said after a moment. "So if a High Master wanted to gain power without suspicion – or even to stay alive – he would have to give the appearance of being completely harmless."

Layle nodded. "The present High Master doesn't use his power to play the King as a puppet – his honor is too great for that. But a good deal goes on in the Hidden Dungeon that the King knows nothing about. It is High Master Millard who decides prisoners' fates, not the King."

"Layle," said Elsdon slowly, "how do you know so much about the High Master? What is your connection with him?"

Layle's expression did not change. "You heard Millard explain our link: we were both trained by my old master. Millard was just finishing his apprenticehood when I came to the Hidden Dungeon. He's the only person alive in Vovim who knows that I arrived at the Hidden Dungeon as a criminal, destined to be executed."

"So Toler Forge . . ." Elsdon hesitated.

A brief look of pain passed across Layle's face. "Toler Forge is my real name. I was counting on Millard to remember that."

"So he knew who you were all the time? Layle, how could you count on him helping you at all? You haven't seen him since you left the Hidden Dungeon."

Layle said nothing, but a faint smile travelled onto his face. After a moment, Elsdon groaned. "I'm as much an idiot as the High Master tries to act," he said. "The prison reform conference."

Layle nodded. "I had to appear before the United Order of Prisons when they considered my request for them to ask the King of Vovim for permission to raid the Hidden Dungeon for you. I was in the guise of a guard, so I appeared naked-faced—"

"—and the High Master attended the conference and recognized you. He didn't tell anyone?"

"No, even though the King was beside him at the time. It was professional courtesy, no doubt. Torturers everywhere in the world are so despised that they tend to stand by one another, even when national loyalties are divided. At any rate, that's when our link was reforged."

Elsdon considered this. The dungeon was so deeply placed below the palace that he could hear nothing, not even the dripping water that was so common in the cavern housing the Eternal Dungeon. The air was chill, but no more so than at home, and Layle's heavy cloak kept him warm. The flagstones were cool under his feet.

Finally he shook his head and said, "Something is still missing from this tale. The High Master was gone from the throne room for only a couple of minutes before he returned with you. You couldn't possibly have convinced him to help you in that amount of time, if you'd had no opportunity to speak with him since you left the dungeon as a youth. And I very much doubt that professional courtesy extends as far as letting your fellow torturer disguise himself in order to rescue his love-mate. Especially not if that torturer has brought about the death of your beloved master." He looked hard at the High Seeker, who was making no sign that he would respond. "Layle, you're hiding something from me. That performance – it was for the High Master rather than the King, wasn't it? Why did he want you to demonstrate the Code to him?"

For a moment more, Layle was silent. Then the right side of his mouth rose, in something between a grimace and a smile. "Because," he said softly, "I have been in correspondence with the High Master for the past three years."

Elsdon sucked in his breath and held it. Then he said, "But you didn't tell —" He bit off the rest of the remark.

"He contacted me through means known only to the King's torturers," Layle said, still quiet. "He trusted me not to disclose his letters to anyone. That is professional courtesy – professional courtesy as it is practiced in the Hidden Dungeon. One of the honors of being a King's Torturer lies in keeping the secrets of that dungeon. Millard took a chance in supposing that I would still hold to this honor after breaking my oath as the King's Torturer."

Elsdon toed the gravel between the flagstones. Whether as a Seeker or as Elsdon's love-mate, Layle rarely said outright, "You ought to have understood this without need for me to tell you." That made his quiet statements of fact all the harder to bear.

Layle continued, as though no reprimand had been implied, "I expected him to speak of our master's death, and to ask how I could have committed such a terrible act. But he said nothing of that. He simply asked me how I had been able to force you to go to Vovim, despite the danger to Yclau visitors at that time. I explained that I had merely asked you to go, and you had gone. Then he began to question me about what other acts I required of my Seekers, and how I was able to persuade them to undertake their duties. I answered all the inquiries that he made, and none that he did not make. Some of my answers required me to explain parts of the Code, but otherwise I did not speak of the Code. Vovimians dislike being made to feel like ignorant barbarians." His gaze rested upon Elsdon.

Elsdon swallowed heavily around the growing lump in his throat. "As I made them feel, you mean. Oh, Layle – all this careful work you've been doing to persuade the High Master to adopt the *Code of Seeking*, and I've destroyed everything for you—"

Layle gave half a smile then. "Things could have gone badly, yes. Fortunately, I was gifted with a fellow player of talent. I arrived here half-expecting to find you screaming the palace walls down, and instead I found you standing upright before the King, speaking boldly, as though you felt no pain." He reached round Elsdon's side and touched lightly the manacles. "No one here could have guessed that, three years ago, my

master managed to break you in the space of a few minutes, simply by binding you."

Elsdon felt his breath quicken, as it had throughout the day when he let himself become aware of the manacles. He managed to give a crooked grin. "That wasn't talent; that was fear. I was afraid that, if they guessed what effect binding my wrists was having on me, they'd bind my ankles as well."

"A little more than fear, I think. Your performance on the stage would have been hard to surpass. When we reached the finale, I swear that I half believed you were truly offering up your life to me."

Elsdon said nothing; he could feel his heart beating hard in his throat again. After a moment, Layle's face changed.

"Sweet blood," he said, softly and reverently. "You didn't recognize my voice."

Elsdon looked down and toed the gravel again. "I knew it was you. But I wasn't sure . . . The way you addressed me, and the orders you gave . . . If I'd been able to see your eyes, I would have been sure—"

Layle pulled him into his arms in one swift movement. Elsdon laid his head upon the High Seeker's shoulder, worried that Layle would break out into another series of apologies, but Layle said nothing. He simply held Elsdon close, as though fearing that only his arms were keeping the junior Seeker from breaking into bits.

The sound of a step caused them both to turn. The door opened, and into the cell walked the High Master.

In the short time he had been gone, High Master Millard had changed into his uniform. It looked much like Layle's clothing, except that his cloak was midnight black, and his hands were covered with gloves of chain-mail. As far as clothes went, he gave all the appearance of being a man like Layle: sober, stiff, formal.

This was as Elsdon had imagined him being behind his disguise, but a moment later, the junior Seeker realized that he had made a grave error.

He ought to have remembered that, even when Layle was play-acting, something of his true self always peered through.

The High Master closed the cell door and leaned against the doorpost. Lounged against it, rather – his hips swaying to create a curve of body. His long hair fell toward his belt, giving the illusion of a delicate pattern upon his clothing. He was smiling, except for his eyes, which had turned from impenetrable grey to hard granite.

"Well," he said lightly in the Yclau tongue, "the King has decided, upon reflection, that he doesn't much care for your play. Too much dialogue, my darlings, and not enough action. He said that it felt to him like an Yclau play he had once been forced to sit through. At any rate, he has given orders that you both be executed."

Elsdon forgot to breathe. Layle was standing a pace behind him; Elsdon could hear a slight movement but did not dare look back to see what it purposed. His gaze was captured by the High Master, who had not turned his eyes toward Layle since his entrance.

For four years Elsdon had known the High Seeker, and never, during their time together, had he known anyone who dared to stand in the presence of Layle Smith and turn his gaze entirely away from the High Seeker. No one had that much courage. If this man believed he could afford to pronounce Layle's death sentence without even looking at him . . .

The High Master gestured briefly to Elsdon to come forward. For a moment Elsdon was paralyzed, like a bird watching the flickering of a snake's tongue; then he remembered why he was here. Without looking back at Layle, he walked forward, stopping just short of arm's reach of the High Master.

The High Master seemed amused by this. For a long moment, he let his gaze drift down to where Layle's cloak had fallen open. Then he stepped forward, saying to Elsdon in his sing-song voice, "The High Seeker was always skilled as a player. But you, I think, were not play-acting."

Elsdon shook his head. He was resisting the instinct to step back as the High Master's cloak brushed his bare body. "I believed the story you told about the High Seeker going mad."

"How foolish of you. And how very foolish of me to have joined you in that belief at first. The Queen must value her High Seeker greatly if she goes to such lengths to protect him."

His voice was unchanged from when he had spoken in the palace above: it held no greater weight than a feather and was much higher in pitch than Layle's. A faint scent of roses came from him – perfume? – and his hair shone like the light of a setting sun on a dancing pond. It fell partly over his face, as it had when he had capered in the theater, in order to draw anger away from the King. The hair had been in his face also when the King had kicked him and called him a traitor.

"So when your love-mate entered the throne room in his old uniform, you thought he had gone mad," concluded the High Master. "Because, of course, only a madman would want to serve the King of Vovim with his art."

Elsdon stared down at the mailed hands. "I'm sorry," he said. "I knew very little about you and the other King's Torturers. I ought not to have made judgment upon you."

One of the mailed hands rose to push his chin up. The High Master was still smiling. "How pretty you are in your apologies, my darling. Tell me, if you thought the High Seeker was mad, why did you answer his questions honestly? In particular, why did you state honestly that you could be sentenced to death for what you had done?"

Elsdon put all his effort into not jerking away from the hand, which was beginning to creep up his jawline. "I was afraid of him, I suppose."

The High Master rolled his eyes. "Mercy above, and he has humility too. The combination is breathtaking." He returned his gaze to Elsdon as his metal-clad fingers stroked the lobe of Elsdon's ear. "Not fear, my darling. A man who is ruled by fear does not return to the kingdom where he has been tortured, and place himself in the same trap again. What rules you? Loyalty to your love-mate?"

Elsdon shook his head, mainly in an attempt to escape the hand. The hand simply followed him, reaching down to stroke his neck.

"What, then?" asked the persistent voice.

Elsdon swallowed beneath the cold metal. "He was searching me as a Seeker does. It didn't matter whether he was mad; it was still my duty to answer him in truth."

"Ah." There was no surprise in the High Master's voice. "Your beloved Code leads you onto foolish paths once more. My darling, I assure you, it is *very* foolish to place your life in the hands of someone you are not sure you trust."

With those words, his hand clamped down upon Elsdon's jaw, and he jerked Elsdon's head to the side; his other hand snatched Elsdon's arm, preventing him from moving away. The hand on the jaw tightened.

For a moment there was no sound except Elsdon's ragged breath. Then the High Master said reflectively, "Odd. The last time someone touched you roughly, that same man was found a short time later with an Yclau dagger through his chest. Yet your love-mate stands armed and does nothing while I maul you."

Elsdon, still unable to move his head in any direction, turned his eyes toward the middle of the cell. There, as the High Master had said, Layle stood with whip in hand, within range to strike.

The High Seeker said softly, "If you try to kill Mr. Taylor, I will indeed act."

"But not if I give him anything short of death?" The High Master's voice remained light.

Layle's gaze flicked toward Elsdon, who was struggling to keep from crying out, and then back to the High Master. "Mr. Taylor is a Seeker, on a mission for the Eternal Dungeon. I will do nothing that might endanger that mission."

The High Master's smile deepened. "Ah, so you have bound yourself by the Code as well. Tell me, 'Layle Smith.'" His voice danced with mockery. "Which do you value more, the Code or your love-mate's health?" He tightened his grip, digging his metal fingers into Elsdon's jaw. The cry that Elsdon had been trying to suppress escaped him.

Layle was motionless and silent for a moment, though Elsdon knew that he had answered this question long ago. They had talked of it in the dawn hours, when they lay together in bed and imagined the worst that might happen in their lives.

Then the High Seeker tossed away the whip, as though it were of no importance. "The Code comes first," he said in a flat voice. "Always."

The High Master chuckled. With a flick of the wrist, he released Elsdon and pushed him firmly upon the chest, sending him stumbling backwards. Elsdon would have fallen, but Layle caught him and remained behind him, providing the support of his body.

The High Master's adamantine eyes moved finally to Layle. "You were always a skilled player," the High Master said, his voice turning equally hard. "You convinced an entire theater full of people that your only concern was to establish effective ways of breaking prisoners. But you do not fool me, High Seeker. Your goal is the same as your love-mate's: to improve the lives of prisoners, to give them a cozy home where they can lay their heads on torturers' laps and sob out their troubles. Well, you can keep that childish vision for the Eternal Dungeon. I'll have no coddling of prisoners in *my* dungeon."

Layle did not reply. His hands were tight upon Elsdon's shoulders, yet he had made no move to retrieve his whip.

After a while, the High Master said, "I've had trouble in getting my men to obey orders."

"I remember that was a problem faced by previous High Masters as well." Layle switched suddenly to the thick-accented tongue of east Vovim, which came as naturally to him as the Yclau language he had learned from his mother. Elsdon had the sudden vision of two master chess players, approaching the climax of their battle.

Or perhaps, he decided upon further reflection, this was also professional courtesy.

The High Master's mind seemed to run along similar lines; his lips twisted into a smirk. "Courtesy was always your mark, High Seeker; I would have

recognized you from that alone, if nothing else. Yes, part of the problem may be long-standing. The Hidden Dungeon has no tradition of providing guidance to High Masters in how to order their men."

He reached inside his cloak; Elsdon tensed, but all that emerged was a familiar black book with gold lettering upon it. The High Master contemplated the book for a minute, turning it this way and that. Then he said, "Pampering prisoners is of no interest to me. But if a code of behavior can make my men more inclined to obey me, I think it's worth trying."

Then, with a movement nearly as swift as the High Seeker's hand when he flicked his whip, the High Master threw the book at Elsdon's chest. Layle caught the volume neatly before it touched Elsdon.

"*My* code," said the High Master, with a growl like that of a mountain cat. "Not a foreign import. I have no need for Yclau rules."

Layle said quietly, "I'm sure that any code you design will be admirably suited for conditions in the Hidden Dungeon. I'd appreciate hearing from you what the results are. It's likely that we can learn from you how to improve the *Code of Seeking*."

"Perhaps." The High Master swept his hair back over his shoulder with a languorous hand. He gave all the appearance, at this moment, of being as weak as a young girl. His eyes fell to Elsdon, and he smiled again. Elsdon felt his face grow warm.

"I'll have you brought to a place where you can be bandaged and dressed," the High Master said in a voice suggesting that he himself would be the one doing the dressing. Then he added, as though in afterthought, "My guards will escort both of you to the border."

Elsdon released the breath he had not known he was holding. From behind him, Layle said quietly, "Thank you, Millard."

The High Master reacted to this intimacy with an abrupt nod. "It's good to have the chance to talk with you again, Forge, but I warn you – three visits is one too many."

"Neither Mr. Taylor nor I will impose on your hospitality again," Layle replied. Elsdon vigorously nodded his agreement.

The High Master's gaze returned to Elsdon. His mouth quirked with amusement. For another long minute he allowed his gaze to run up and down the full length of Elsdon's body. "What a pity," he said finally. "I would have enjoyed making Mr. Taylor my guest in the Hidden Dungeon."

Then he turned, and with a swift, elegant movement, he opened the door and left the cell.

Elsdon did not realize he was shaking again until he felt Layle's hands stroke his shoulders, steadying him. "He's trying to scare you away from returning, Elsdon."

"I know," replied Elsdon in a breathless voice. "And I also know that he meant what he said."

He felt cool air touch his back as Layle lifted the cloak and slid his fingers between Elsdon's wrists and the manacles. Hidden latches clicked, and then Elsdon was free.

His knees gave way.

Layle was ready; he caught Elsdon and held him as the junior Seeker sought to regain his breath. "Shh," said the High Seeker softly. "Just stay still for a while."

He did so, burying his head between Layle's neck and shoulder, and taking in the High Seeker's familiar musky scent. Then he heard a clang and turned his face to see that Layle had tossed away the manacles.

Elsdon pulled himself upright. His jaw still ached from the touch of the metal fingers, but he ignored the pain, trying to stiffen his back. "Layle," he said quietly, "I know that this isn't the end of the play. I know that when we return home, you'll have to arrest me."

"No." The High Seeker's hand slid into the pocket of his trousers.

"But Layle, I broke the Code—"

The High Seeker's hand re-emerged; in it was a clean handkerchief, which he placed across the lips of Elsdon to muffle his protests. "No," he said firmly. "You applied to me for permission to leave the Eternal Dungeon on a mission to Vovim. I passed on that request to the Codifier, with my recommendation that it be approved. The Codifier sent me his approval the day before you left." He spat on the cloth and began wiping Elsdon's face free of the dust and the dried blood and tears.

Elsdon waited until he was finished before saying, "You knew that I would run away?"

"As did the Codifier." Layle pocketed the cloth and moved his hands to tie his cloak closed on Elsdon. "Along with his approval, the Codifier sent an approval for me to leave the dungeon to go after you."

Elsdon felt his face turn hot. He bit his lower lip and looked down. "Layle, why didn't you lock me in a cell rather than let me endanger your plans and your life?"

The High Seeker gave a snort that sounded like laughter. "As though any cell could hold you if you were determined to do something. Besides, that is the difference between Yclau and Vovim: we leave people free to make honest mistakes, and to learn from those mistakes." He reached forward to kiss Elsdon.

A finger's width short of the kiss, Layle jerked his head up. Through the open doorway came angry mutterings: the voice was that of the High Master's chief guard, who was apparently ill-satisfied at the idea of aiding in the escape of two condemned criminals. His complaint was cut off by sharp words from the High Master.

Listening, Elsdon said, "Love, if the High Master restricts his torturers and guards through a code of behavior, it's bound to have a positive effect on the prisoners."

"He knows that, Elsdon," Layle replied quietly. "He just wouldn't admit that before the Yclau."

Elsdon gave him a sharp look. "Layle," he said, "you can't make me believe that a man like that would willingly bind himself and others if it

would bring benefit to the prisoners. It defies common sense. . . ."

Layle gave him another of those looks that said, *Not in Vovim.* He said carefully, "Elsdon, Millard is an artist. A true artist, one who will sacrifice pleasure for the sake of his art. Since the time I knew him as a youth, Millard has been seeking the most orderly and craftsmanlike means of breaking prisoners. That is why he uses words as his primary means to break prisoners – not because he dislikes physical torture, but because he is more skilled at verbal torture. And if someone should come along and offer him a yet more artistic means to break prisoners . . ."

The High Master's reprimand ended; his footsteps started up and then began to fade away. The reproved guard growled again: a final, biting remark meant to reach the ears of the High Master. There was no pause in the footsteps.

It came to Elsdon then that the great mistake he and Layle had made was to hold their performance in public. Too many people had seen the demonstration; sooner of later, one of the spectators was bound to notice the similarity between the High Master's new code of behavior and a play performed by a highly skilled torturer whose name appeared nowhere in the records of east Vovim's prisons. And if that spectator told the King . . .

Elsdon turned his gaze toward Layle. From the soberness of the High Seeker's expression, it was clear that his thoughts matched Elsdon's. Elsdon said, "I thought that *our* sacrifice was going to form the finale of this play."

Layle smoothed back Elsdon's hair from his face. "I told you long ago, my dear: the Vovimians are less barbaric than they are thought to be." He touched a light kiss to Elsdon's lips. "Let's go home."

"Home." Elsdon reached up and touched the smiling prisoner on Layle's torque. "Layle, *this* is your home. I just never realized it."

"The Eternal Dungeon is my home now," the High Seeker replied. But as he spoke, he lifted his face and looked at the carving above the door, as a man might look at a beloved he must leave forever.

And then he hooked his veil back into place, and Master Toler and his prisoner took their first steps on their final journey from Vovim.

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. . . The torture-god is so strongly identified in the popular mind with Vovim's old dungeon of torture that one historian has gone as far to say that Vovim's Hidden Dungeon was devoted to the service of Hell, while the Eternal Dungeon in neighboring Yclau was devoted to the service of Mercy, but this is clearly a shallow perspective on a complicated situation. Even a cursory glance at the history of the two dungeons will assure us that Mercy and Hell were to be found in both places, sometimes even within the same torturer.

A classic example of this is the Eternal Dungeon's first High Seeker. In recent years, it has become fashionable to portray Layle Smith solely as a devotee of Hell, mercilessly breaking prisoners with no thought but his own pleasure. We will leave aside the fact that this view reveals no understanding of the deeply sacrificial nature of Vovimians' traditional worship of Hell. What is important to note is that this new, "modern" view is nothing other than the older view of Layle Smith turned on its head. Whereas previous biographers of the first High Seeker portrayed him as a man of pure mercy, with no flaw to stain his life, recent biographers have similarly simplified the truth, merely substituting one god for another.

Of course, humans are too complex to easily categorize in this way. This is particularly the case with Layle Smith, whose life seems to have been lived in perpetual tension between a desire to serve Mercy, whose face was best known in Yclau's Eternal Dungeon, and a memory of what he owed to Hell, whom he had served in Vovim's Hidden Dungeon. It is perhaps inevitable that the time would come when the fragile balance he had achieved began to tilt, so that one deity was worshipped almost to the exclusion of the other. This is in fact what happened in 360, roughly a year after Layle Smith returned from his final trip to Vovim. And at that point, as one historian has wryly put it, "Hell broke loose in the Eternal Dungeon."

That Layle Smith wished to serve both deities makes the tale of what followed his trip to Vovim especially poignant.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***The Balance* 3**
HIDDEN

The year 360, the fifth month.

Much thought has been given by psychologists to the vexed question of how a child's gender and sexuality are formed. The predominant theory in our times is that the child's impulses toward particular gender behavior and sexual behavior are not fully formed until he or she takes on his or her first romantic partner. At that time, most psychologists believe, the training that the less experienced partner receives under the aegis of the more experienced partner serves to seal his or her future. In extreme cases, the person's sexuality may be so narrowed that he or she can only be attracted thereafter to a single gender.

This is the predominant theory; but many other ideas have been advanced over the centuries. Perhaps the oddest comes from a fourth-century manuscript – not originally intended as a psychological document – whose author theorizes that one's gender and sexuality are determined, not by one's first romantic partner, but by one's parents.

We may be tempted to dismiss such a theory as the ravings of a sexual deviant. Indeed, even by the standards of his own society, the author was out of the ordinary . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

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Day 3: One hundred lashes today. At least, it was supposed to be one hundred lashes, but my darling torturer (I call him that to annoy him) was fooled when I pretended to faint after the fifteenth lash. He didn't even

order the guards in the corridor to poke me back to wakefulness with their bayonets. Makes me ashamed to acknowledge that we belong to the same profession.

Afterwards he complied with my request for pencil and ledger-book. He even sharpened the pencil for me with his dagger. Idiot, idiot, idiot. Doesn't he realize what could be done to him if anyone finds out he's giving special favors to me?

Why am I surrounded by incompetents? This dungeon is filled with torturers who bungle simple rackings, burn themselves on their own pokers, and grow enamored with their prisoners and help them escape. I'm glad Toler isn't here to witness this.

Day 4: Another attempt at the hundred lashes, another bluffed faint. This time my darling torturer brought water to me. Any hopes I'd had, though, that he would dash it in my face were frustrated when I discovered that he was planning to give me water to assuage my thirst. I would have screamed at him, but I was too busy gulping down the water. It's been four days since I was allowed to eat or drink.

I reminded him of his duty afterwards, though. He looked hurt, and then slapped me to the ground. There might be some hope for him yet.

Day 18: The gap in time is because we actually managed to finish the hundred lashes. Instead of immediately following up on his advantage, though, my darling torturer allowed me time to heal. I might as well admit that he's a loss and resign myself to being in the care of the kindest, gentlest torturer who has ever performed in the Hidden Dungeon.

Curse it, no. He will *not* disgrace me like this. I'll see him dead first.

Day 19: Gave my darling torturer a small lecture yesterday about the duty of a torturer to his art. It seems to have done him good; he used the poker on me afterwards. I'm still able to write, which means he was too soft on me. I wish I could figure out how to reach him.

In the meantime, I can continue keeping this record, which I expect will be invaluable to future generations of the King's Torturers. This must be the

first time in history that a prisoner has recorded his reactions while being tortured to death.

Day 20: More of the poker. My darling torturer doesn't seem to have the ability to vary his performances. He hasn't even raped me yet.

I reminded him of this – oh gods, why must I spoon-feed the men here as though they were small children? He growled, "You'd like that too much," which was quite a satisfactory answer.

I gave him a simpering smile and said, "Not quite, my darling. I'm always the husband."

This wasn't as truthful an answer as I could have given, and I'm thankful that Master Aeden is no longer around. He would undoubtedly have been assigned the production of my slow death, and he would have caught me out on that lie at once. I forget how many times I tried to slip into my old master's bed – eight? nine? "I won't sleep with my apprentices," he always told me.

Cursed man. He failed to tell me that he wouldn't sleep with men either. "That sort of thing isn't proper," he told me on the day I became a master torturer and triumphantly came to his living cell, expecting to receive my just reward. "A man's job is to serve as husband – to a woman if he's properly made, or if need be, to a boy in one of the brothels. You're not going to disgrace yourself by acting as wife to me, and I can assure you that I have no intention of acting as husband to you. You must follow in the footsteps of your father and learn to be a husband."

Oh, so easy for him to say. He hadn't grown up with a mother who proudly told the world how my father was master of our house, and then proceeded to make most of the household decisions on his behalf. Cursed woman. I wish she were still alive so that I could place her on the rack. I suppose it's too much to hope that the torture-god is taking care of that for me.

Why am I thinking about such things? I hope this isn't a sign that my mind is starting to go. I need to stay alert till the end, for the sake of this record.

Day 21: The leg locks today. Gods. Now I know why my prisoners always lost their voices screaming.

Day 40: He has let me heal again. I'm beginning to have the terrible feeling that he's acting under orders. How long has it been since the Hidden Dungeon received orders that a prisoner be tortured for years? It hasn't happened in my lifetime anyway. But it would be just like *him* to choose me for the honor.

Self-sucking, foul-breathed, brainless man with not a single speck of art in his soul . .

Oh, why do I bother? If I recited a thousand curses, it would only be to repeat what the whole world knows. Why didn't I seize power when I had the chance? It was what my men expected me to do. And then, when I didn't, they decided that I was what I presented myself to the world as being: the King's lackey, a girlish, cowardly, idiotic man.

They may have been right.

Day 42: I had to have another little talk with my darling torturer: he has been letting too much time go before my next torture. He promised to bring me into the rack room tomorrow, to use the instruments there.

That sounded more like what I'd expect from one of my men. I tested him, saying, "Please don't use the hook on me. I want my hands to be well enough to write in my ledger."

He hit me then. And kicked me. And told me he'd be the one to decide my fate, and I'd better keep my mouth shut if I wanted any teeth left.

It was all so artificial – none of it was from the heart. What a shame. I would swear that my darling torturer has fire in him; I would never have let him work for me if he hadn't had promise. I can't imagine where that fire is going. To the brothel boys, I suppose.

When I suggested this, though, he turned red. "I don't hold with making boys into wives," he said. "They'll be men some day."

"Well," I suggested, letting my hand linger on him, "you could let them be the husbands. I'd help you train for that."

His kicks then were much more convincing. Really, he has the potential in him to be a true artist, if he would only put his mind to his work.

Day 43: Not the hook. The claw. Gods help me.

Day 58: My worst fears are confirmed. My darling torturer admitted today that he is under orders to keep me alive as long as possible.

I'm ashamed to admit that I tried to subvert him. I'm glad to report that he refused to be subverted. "It's the King's orders," he said. "It's as much as my life is worth to disobey him."

"Shall I tell you what I think of the King's orders?" I asked, and proceeded to do so. I have no real hope, though, that he'll report my words to the King. He undoubtedly wants to stay as far away from the royal personage as he can. Wise man.

Day 64: He still hasn't raped me. I can't figure out whether I'm disappointed.

I don't know why it keeps running through my mind that I'm to die a virgin. The torture-god knows that, from a certain perspective, I lost my virginity long ago. With a sweet, frail prisoner who screamed when I took him – I've never forgotten him. A shame that I had to strangle that one.

I don't think anyone, not even Master Aeden, guessed what it was that I really wanted. Master Aeden thought I'd be happy enough once I started raping prisoners, and I let him think that. True, it was a pleasure to practice my art, especially as I came to know how skilled I was in this role. That ought to have been enough.

Toler knew, curse him. Toler, "Layle Smith" as he now calls himself, that traitor who betrayed the King of Vovim and took charge of the dungeon in the Queendom of Yclau. Intelligent man, though I would have chosen a different country to flee to: nobody in that barbaric land besides Toler knows that torture can be an art.

Anyway, he guessed. Came to me one night eighteen months after he started his apprenticeship under Master Aeden, and told me – me, Master Millard – that he believed I had not yet been fully trained, because I did not know what it was like to be a prisoner.

"I can show you," he said in that cold-blooded manner of his. "I can rape you."

I threw him against the wall. Most foolish thing I ever did. Not simply because it was like throwing a cold, deadly viper against the wall – I was lucky to escape alive from that encounter. No, it was foolish because it was the only chance I'd ever had and would ever have.

Until *him.* But that doesn't truly count.

Day 65: My darling torturer tried a little flaying on me today. He took it ill when I attempted to show him how he could improve his technique.

He still hasn't crippled my hands. I ought to reprove him for that: he should know that, if a prisoner begs to have a certain part of the body preserved, it's the torturer's duty to destroy that part of the body. I'm losing interest in training him, though. My mind is on how I can end this. I wish I hadn't been so effective in finding ways to prevent prisoners from killing themselves.

I thought of death after that first night with *him.* Then I decided that, if I were any sort of man, I would have killed myself on the day he named me High Master of his dungeon. Or at the moment I decided to go to his bedroom to keep him sweet. Yes, that act preserved my life for nine years, far longer than any other High Master survived. I was able to keep him convinced that I had no ambitions, that I wasn't any threat to his throne.

But at what a price. It wasn't simply knowing what my men and the rest of the world thought of me. It was knowing what I thought of myself. I would lie awake at night, after it was over, and remember the dreams I had had when I was young, of lying on silken sheets covered with rose petals, as my new husband took my maidenhead.

Here is where such ill-made dreams had brought me: to having what remained of my manhood stripped from me, as the world watched.

I could comfort myself in those days that my work remained. Whatever the others thought of me, my prisoners still knew that I had power over them. I could take them, I could break them, I could make them regret they'd ever met me.

All that is gone. What am I now?

Day 66: He says he'll rape me tomorrow. Thank the gods. However long I linger in death, at least I'll die knowing that someone besides *him* has taken me.

Day 67: Curse. Curse. He lied. It was the rack. Oh, gods, I cannot continue this. How can I find a way to die?

Day 68: I begged him to kill me today. I have been reduced to that.

It took me an hour to write the two sentences above. I don't expect I'll be able to continue this record. I fail at this as at all else.

Day 89: He healed me again. I forgot. I am not to be allowed to die.

He is better at his art than I had thought. He knows how to raise hope, only to dash it again. I told him so; he deserves the praise. He said nothing. I wish I had Toler's ability to read the thoughts of other men. If I could anticipate which instrument he was going to use on me next, I might be able to figure out a way to make him kill me.

Day 94: Gods. Gods. Gods. Every offering I ever made, every prisoner I ever sacrificed to the torture-god, was worth it.

I am to be allowed to die. My darling torturer – who is not quite so wise as I'd thought – went to the King and told him what I'd said about him. Or words to that effect; I don't think my torturer remembered the exact wording after all this time.

Amazingly, he survived. The King, it seems, was too furious at me to execute the messenger. Acting on his usual stupid impulses, he ordered my immediate death rather than letting me linger on as I deserved. There are advantages to serving a king who has the mind of a child.

I quizzed my darling torturer carefully to be sure that he understood his duties. He must seal the wound with the brand immediately after cutting me: otherwise, I will die on the castration table and not be available for the horses. And when he ties me to the horses, it must be *tight*. The King will not be pleased if the knots give way when the horses begin pulling, and I'm left alive and whole rather than rent asunder.

I don't think he was listening properly – he kept turning green. Well, I must be fair; I felt a bit queasy too when I performed my first royal execution. And believe me, there is little in this dungeon that makes me queasy.

Day 95: A slight delay: one of the royal horses has gone lame and must be replaced. I wish this were over with. I'm beginning to think about what it will be like.

I'm determined to do this right, if I've done nothing else right in my life. When they take me to the castration shed, I will not whimper and whine and look like the man I have been for the past nine years – like the man I have been my whole life, if I would be honest with myself. I will be the man my father should have been: strong and full of courage. I will not bargain for my life, I will not plead for mercy. Nor will I plead for Mercy. I'm sure She gave up on me long ago. It will be her Brother who welcomes me into afterdeath, and I am determined to show the torture-god that I have the skills to continue my art in his dungeon.

For if he declines my services and sends me instead to the cells of hell . . .

I can do this. I can be what Master Aeden wanted me to be. I will be *cursed* if Toler hears that I ended my life grovelling. He knows my weaknesses already; let him know my strengths.

Day 96: Tonight. It's to be tonight.

I asked my darling torturer to preserve this volume after my death, for the sake of future generations of torturers. He refused. Here I've been waiting for him to become a true artist, and he chooses the worst possible moment to comply.

I hope he is equally competent with the knife. I've seen messy castrations, and I—

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Oh, gods. I cannot do this. I cannot. Mercy, remember me.

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They are coming. Curse my mother again. If it had not been for her, I would have the courage to do this. I am sure of it. May I meet her in the hell-cell where I am placed.

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May the torture-god of hell take my darling torturer and flay him until his bones have been scraped clean, and then break those bones into a thousand pieces.

He spared my life! I'm too angry to write more.

Day 148: I finally managed to cool my fury enough today to ask my darling torturer where we are.

"Yclau," he said.

This is the limit. I must find a way to kill him.

Day 157: The cottage is on the outskirts of a city, I think. The capital city, perhaps? If so, we must be near Toler's dungeon. I wonder whether he has heard yet of my death.

I let my darling torturer tell me about it tonight, after I had ascertained that I had enough patience to keep from throttling him. It was quite simple, really. He showed the King my bloody body and told him I'd died under the cutting. Apparently, the King turned so green that he didn't even notice I was still breathing.

His guards noticed, I'm sure. But the King had decided I was dead, and you don't contradict the wishes of the King. My body was testimony to that.

I told him, "My darling, you were too sweet. And to have gone to the trouble to make my death look so authentic."

He turned pink then. "I had to cut you," he said in a low voice. "The King isn't such a fool that he couldn't tell the difference between a castrate and a whole man."

I wonder. I'm having a hard time telling the difference myself. Oh, there's the pain, of course – I hate to think how many months it will be before that is gone. And there are obvious results – no rose-petalled sheets in my

future. But I would have expected that the change from being a man to becoming a half-man would be greater than it has been.

Unless I was a half-man all along.

Day 161: I found myself staring out the window today at the women passing by. When I was young, I used to hate my mother for not giving birth to a girl. Now, though, I suspect that I would have been just as unhappy that way: I would have been a boyish girl, play-acting at torture and being shunned by the other girls.

I don't miss the torture, oddly enough. I ought to – it was my art, and without it, I'm nothing. Nothing lies ahead of me in life, and nothing dwells behind me that is worth thinking about – except the knowledge that I did not plead on my way to the castration shed. I hope Toler heard that.

It's not too late to kill myself. This would be a good time to end matters.

Day 169: It really is a lovely cottage. I asked my darling torturer how he could afford to buy it.

"It was a present from the King," he told me. "He rewarded me with gold, and with my freedom from the dungeon, in thanks for services rendered."

I didn't bother to ask him how he managed to smuggle my unconscious body to the border. Did he have help from some of my other men? I don't suppose there's any hope that I left behind a single torturer who was worthy of his calling. The only worthy successor to me lives in this city, in the dungeon he runs.

I wonder whether he had as much contempt for me as the others did. I suppose I'll never know.

Gods, I'm tired. I could sleep forever.

Day 177: I decided today that, if I truly did not have the courage to kill myself, I must at least make a show at being what I never was: a man, capable of caring for myself. I told my darling torturer that I was planning to look for a job.

"A job?" he said, staring at me as though I'd proposed hiring myself out to a boy brothel. Perhaps he thought that was what I had in mind.

I gave him another of those simpering smiles I perfected nine years ago, and which I haven't been able to rid myself of. "Work, my darling. Money. Your gift from the King won't last us forever. —Unless," it occurred to me suddenly, "you've been waiting for me to move out?"

I don't know why the pause that followed seemed so long. I suppose it was simply that there was nothing else left for me to lose. I was no good at facing the end: I'd already acknowledged that to myself.

He had turned pink again. "There's no need for that," he said. "I mean . . . You shouldn't do outside work any more. Not with you changed like you are. It's not proper for you to . . . It was proper in the past, but now . . ."

Gods help me, I don't know why I ever thought myself competent in my art. It took me three whole minutes of listening to him babble before it finally came home to me what he was saying.

When I realized, I suddenly remembered the smile that had been there before I taught myself to simper. "My darling," I said, "you don't mean to say you've grown *enamored* with me?"

He turned yet more pink, but stood rooted as I walked forward. Nor did he pull away when I put my arms around his waist.

"Blue," I purred. "I shall wear a blue gown for you. It matches your eyes."

He swallowed heavily, and when he spoke, his voice was husky. "There's no need to go that far," he said. "I just want you to understand . . . I'm the husband."

"My darling, I wouldn't have it any other way," I said, slouching myself so that it would be less obvious that I was the taller one.

It would have been more accurate to say I couldn't have it any other way. But there was truth to what I said, though I did not yet wholly realize it – gods, looking back on my entries in this ledger, I *ought* to have realized it. The knowledge that had been hidden from me didn't fully emerge, though, until this evening, when I was sitting on my darling's lap, feeding him the food I'd cooked, as I had in all my childhood imaginings. As I fed him, I told him of my other childhood imagining, of what it would be like on my wedding night.

By the time I was through, I'd put him in such a state that there was no question of my being given rose-petalled sheets: he simply thrust me to the floor and took me there. Thank the gods I'd had enough foresight to serve butter with the dinner.

Afterwards, he apologized at length, telling me he'd give me everything I'd asked for, and more. I told him not to think of it again – that knowing he wanted me was better than all the silken sheets in the world.

It was true too. I realize now that, during all these years, I've never imagined myself being taken except by slow, stolid Master Aeden (who didn't want me) or by cold, calculating Toler (who didn't really want me either). To be taken by a man who truly wanted me, and who is as hot and forceful in bed as myself . . . My toes tingle now, just to think of it. Why didn't I ever realize that a man's nerve endings can still function when his manhood has been taken from him? I would have recommended to the King long ago that castrations be replaced with flayings.

Day 200: This is the last page of my ledger, but it hardly matters: for days, I have been too busy to write. I never imagined that taking care of a house could be an art.

My darling has been ever so helpful, offering to work extra hours at the manufactory so that he can buy me cloth for curtains and promising to get me a cat so that I can be rid of the mice in my kitchen. I told him not to bother with the last, that I had my own way of dealing with mice. I don't want to lose my hand entirely at my old profession.

I've decided to tear out the final pages of this ledger and have my darling send the remainder of the account, up to the time of my execution, to Yclau's dungeon. It may help Toler with his work. If he sheds an uncharacteristic tear or two upon reading of my death, it will be as much as he deserves, for not taking me after I threw him against the wall so long ago. But I suppose all has worked out for the best: if I had become Toler's wife when he made his offer, Toler would not have become master of his own dungeon, and I would not be where I am today. Where I belong at last.

My darling is so very sweet. He let me help him with repairing the chimney yesterday, and didn't say a word when I carried the heaviest loads.

And last night in bed . . . Well, as I told him, a true husband is one who is artistic enough to master from below, now and then.

Dear mother. She would be so proud if she knew that I've followed in her footsteps.

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. . . Indeed, even by the standards of his own society, the author was out of the ordinary, though from our perspective, his oddity lies in the fact that he tried to conform himself to the behavioral standards of his society rather than recognize the essential flaws in his society's concepts of gender and sexuality. This has led psychologists who have examined the manuscript to put forward a new theory: that one's gender and sexuality are determined, not by other individuals in one's life, but rather by a person's attempts to shape his or her inborn impulses into a socially acceptable pattern.

One may ask what all this has to do with the Eternal Dungeon, for though the manuscript in question was found in the archives of the Eternal Dungeon, its origins evidently lie in Vovim. What is interesting about the manuscript, from the point of view of historians of the Yclau dungeon, is that it is the only document found in that dungeon which makes explicit references to sexuality. Occasional references to gender can be found in documents describing the early hiring of women as inner dungeon workers, but the inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon seem to have been singularly uninterested in the topic of sexuality – or at least considered this to be a highly private matter.

A historian may be tempted to judge from the dungeon's silence about sexuality – its lack of agonized and self-deprecating memoirs, such as can be found in Vovim during this period – that the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon was also the Golden Age of sexuality in Yclau. But perhaps that would be taking a step too far, for what is kept hidden is not always hidden for reasons of pride. It may be that, in the lonely and anxious scribblings of a Vovimian struggling to come to terms with his gender and sexuality, we have seen that era at its best.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***The Balance* 4**
DEATH WATCH

The year 360, the sixth month.

One of the most common errors made by historians writing about the Eternal Dungeon is to assume that the dungeon's first High Seeker, Layle Smith, was alone among the Seekers in his penchant for violence.

Dungeons of torture attract brutal men – that can be treated as a given. Indeed, the Eternal Dungeon was unusual precisely because it attracted a high proportion of workers who had no inherent gift for brutality but were drawn to the place by the high ideals expressed in its *Code of Seeking* – ideals that, in theory anyway, placed the welfare of the prisoners before all other considerations. Such contemporaries of Layle Smith as Weldon Chapman and Seward Sobel must have seemed striking in their time, not for the brutal acts that they were required to commit, but for their lack of desire to commit such acts.

All nations go through the same four stages in their attitude toward torture. In the beginning, torture is not questioned, either as a means or as an end in itself. It is simply practiced. At a later stage, humans develop the need to justify their cruel treatment of prisoners, and so they evolve the theory that harsh punishments and ordeals are necessary in order to maintain social order. In the past, this justification was most commonly associated with the notorious Hidden Dungeon in the Kingdom of Vovim, where it was believed that, without the practice of torture, the King's peace would be destroyed.

At a yet later stage, nations come to realize that social order alone cannot justify the wrenching of limbs or the scarring of bodies. At this point, a deeper thinking takes place, and the men and women who practice torture satisfy their consciences by arguing that torture is necessary in order to reform criminals and to allow them the opportunity to confess their crimes.

This ideal was initially developed by the Eternal Dungeon in the Queendom of Yclau, from which it spread to many nations. The ideal flourished for the first century and a half of the dungeon's history. Though we have now moved beyond that ideal to a yet higher one – a realization that nothing at all can justify the evils brought about by the mutilation of bodies – it would be a mistake for us to think that we have moved beyond the Eternal Dungeon's early years in all respects. Heated debates in our present-day society over methods of criminal "reform" such as forced therapy in prisons show that this ideal has not disappeared from our society, but merely mutated into a more insidious form.

That there was a grain of truth to this ideal is clear from the documents found within the Eternal Dungeon. Some prisoners did indeed undergo a marvellous transformation of heart as a result of the torture they endured. But as many commentators have noted, idealization of torture brings certain dangers not present in older beliefs about torture. Cruelty may be sated and a desire for punishment satisfied, but a determination to transform a prisoner's mind will not rest content with anything less than a complete breaking of heart and soul. In that respect, Layle Smith was far more dangerous than his counterpart in the Hidden Dungeon.

Yet Layle Smith was not alone in either his longing to hurt prisoners or his idealization of torture that provided him with justification for what he did. Many torturers in his time struggled with similar problems . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

Layle Smith caught his breath. He always caught his breath when Elsdon Taylor knelt in front of him, as the young man was wont to do at the most unexpected moments, probably because he enjoyed seeing Layle caught off-guard. Sometimes Layle wondered why, in the names of all the minor deities, he had chosen a love-mate who kept him continually off-balance, rather than the helpless, compliant victim he had so often dreamed about.

Then Elsdon would smile up at him, his eyes simultaneously filled with gentleness and wisdom, and Layle would remember.

"What is this?" Layle asked, trying to sound as commanding as a man who held the title of High Seeker ought to sound, though he very much doubted that his love-mate was fooled. Elsdon was a Seeker as well.

"My present," said Elsdon. "Did you think I'd forgotten?"

Layle, sitting in his usual armchair as he tried to finish reading a tall stack of guards' reports on the table beside him, looked down at where Elsdon knelt at his feet. Between his legs, in actual fact, a space which by all rights Elsdon should not have been able to reach without Layle noticing. Layle would have been long dead if he had been that careless with a prisoner. "Never forget that most of the prisoners in this dungeon believe that their only road to escape lies in killing you." He had told that to dozens of Seekers-in-Training over the years, including the young man kneeling before him.

When had he become so complacent to Elsdon's presence that his love-mate could take him unawares like this?

He cleared his throat. "I don't see any gift."

A dimple appeared in Elsdon's cheek. "Yes, you do."

Layle reflected to himself that Elsdon was showing unusual mercy by remaining clothed during this speech. Of course, that could be because he knew how much the High Seeker enjoyed ordering him to strip. Layle sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had not only become complacent; the pattern between him and Elsdon had become so predictable that his love-mate could plan the next move without awaiting Layle's word.

And that, he feared, was precisely what Elsdon was trying to point out to him.

He tried to stall. "Our fifth anniversary was three months ago."

"The fourth month of 355 is when we met. The seventh month is when we became love-mates."

He made a quick calculation in his head – a very quick calculation, for those early days were imprinted in his mind like gold upon scrollwork. "Then our anniversary was three days ago. That's when we first kissed."

"That was before I discovered what sort of dreamings you had about me. And when I did—"

"You quite sensibly broke matters off between us rather than risk being bedded by a sadist." He heard the harshness in his voice. After all this time, he still could not believe that Elsdon had made a wise choice in selecting him as a love-mate.

"And even more sensibly mended matters with you the next day." Elsdon sounded as blithe as he always did when discussing that decision.

"Which means yesterday was our anniversary." He strove to keep control of the conversation. The gods alone knew why; he had never won any battle that Elsdon set out to win.

He looked round the small Seekers' cell that he and Elsdon shared. All about him, he noticed for the first time in many months, were signs that he did not live alone. On a nearby table lay a technical manual on the workings of steam engines, the sort of information which made Layle's mind spin but which Elsdon happily gobbled up in his few spare moments. Nearby was a report by Elsdon about his latest prisoner, carefully composed in his school-neat handwriting. And over the bed-rail in the adjoining room lay Elsdon's hood.

Seekers never removed their hoods except when they were about to bathe or go to bed. They might raise the face-cloth of their hoods when they were in private, but the complete removal of a hood was reserved for bathtime and bedtime. For much of the year, Layle found the mere removal of Elsdon's hood to be an extremely erotic act.

And yet Elsdon had removed his hood without Layle even noticing it. And Elsdon could not have failed to miss the fact that Layle had not noticed it.

Layle rubbed his eyes again. This was beginning to look very bad.

"Today," insisted Elsdon. "Yesterday was the anniversary of when I agreed to stay with you forever. Today is the day when I managed to convince you that I was telling the truth."

He surrendered then. It was always easier to surrender; whatever Elsdon was planning would be less painful that way, as many of the junior Seeker's prisoners had discovered.

Laying aside his writing board, Layle said, "I haven't forgotten that day."

Elsdon smiled again, the smile of a Seeker who senses the approach of a breaking. "I should hope not," he said. "The day ended much better than it began."

"It could not possibly have ended worse than it began," Layle replied dryly.

CHAPTER TWO

He had awoken, on that day after, to find himself lying alone in bed.

He discovered this with a quick grope of the hands over the bedcovers, without opening his eyes. As High Seeker, he was one of the Seekers entitled to a double bed, though he had slept alone until the day before. Now, it appeared, the previous pattern would continue.

He refused to open his eyes. It had all been a dreaming, then: the promise of everlasting love, the passion that had followed upon that promise, the warmth of Elsdon's body – and more importantly, the warmth of his companionship. Layle had expected it to happen one day: his dreamings had become so real that he had begun to believe them.

He refused to open his eyes. He was afraid that, if he did, he would see something that would force him to confront a far worse possibility: that he had indeed slept with Elsdon, and that Elsdon had crept away while he slept, irreparably damaged by their brief joining.

The covers of the bed were scratchy wool – more scratchy than they needed to be. A form of asceticism, a penance for what he had done in the past and what, from time to time, despite all his will, he continued to do. He lay on his back, his eyes closed, trying to force himself to rise. Time could be of the essence in healing Elsdon – if there was still any chance of healing the young Seeker whom he had hurt so badly so many times now. Perhaps it would be best to let others take over the task he had failed at. . . .

The bedsprings creaked.

He reacted automatically, which meant he reacted violently. Reaching toward the only loose object at hand – the night-table next to the bed – he grasped it by its leg, wrenched it from the floor, and had begun to swing it toward the intruder before he checked himself in time.

He opened his eyes. Elsdon, fully clothed and hooded but with his face-cloth raised, sat beside him. He looked, Layle realized with amazement, more amused than fearful.

"By all that is sacred," Elsdon said, speaking the mildest of oaths, "is this how you always greet your love-mates upon awakening?"

Layle slowly lowered the night-table, feeling the blood thunder within his body. "I've never had a love-mate before who slept with me."

"I can see why, if this is how you wake from your sleep."

Layle slowly raised himself into a sitting position. Elsdon was still smiling, he noted with growing incredulity. The Seeker-in-Training had made a *joke* about the fact that Layle was a killer born.

Perhaps he was still sleeping. He rubbed his eyes.

"I'm sorry to wake you," said Elsdon softly, "but Mr. Chapman told me yesterday that I should report to him at the beginning of today's night shift. That's not long from now." He glanced in the direction of the water-clock in the corner of the room.

Layle did not need to glance that way. He knew the sounds of the dungeon like a mother knows the sounds of her baby. It said something about his state of mind that he had slept all the way into the brief dusk period between the day and night shifts.

"I have to report as well," said Layle. He began to reach toward the night-table, realized that he had toppled all the objects on it onto the floor, and reached down to fish his hood off the ground. "I need to appear in the dragon's lair."

"Oh." Elsdon stood and watched as Layle settled the frame holding the hood onto his head, then smoothed down the cloth that hid the sides and back of his head and neck. "Will that be bad for you? I mean, I know the Codifier isn't the most patient man . . ."

"Bad?" Layle raised his eyebrows as he placed onto the night-table the *Code of Seeking*, one of the objects he had tumbled onto the floor. "Bad is meeting you in the corridor and hearing you threaten to send me to the hangman. Being lectured by the Codifier about my lack of control is easy by comparison."

There was a moment's silence, and then Elsdon burst into laughter. He tossed Layle the shirt he had been groping for, one of the many articles of clothing that had ended up strewn on the floor the previous night. Layle was still wearing his trousers – an old habit, for he had never stripped himself fully when raping prisoners in the Hidden Dungeon. Remaining partially clothed allowed a Vovimian torturer to make his prisoner feel vulnerable in his or her nakedness. As Layle stood up and tried to brush out the creases in his trousers, he wondered how long it would be before he could break himself of such old habits. Or whether it was even possible to do so.

"I'm sorry." Elsdon smiled at him. "I'm sure you know that. I badly misjudged you."

He felt worry touch him then, like a knife. "You didn't misjudge me. I'm as dangerous as you surmised, and I've done in the past what you thought I was doing in the present."

"Then I misjudged myself. Layle . . . I remembered yesterday how I killed my sister."

In the midst of tying his shirt closed – the shirt was mussed, but the Codifier wouldn't care – Layle grew still. He searched Elsdon's face, trying to read the pain behind it.

He had known that this would happen eventually. During the past three months, as Elsdon underwent his transition from prisoner to Seeker-in-Training, the young man had gone from the extreme of believing that he was entirely to blame for his kin-murder to the other extreme of believing that he was entirely blameless for the murder. Of course, he might have been entirely blameless, but his loss of memory suggested otherwise. Prisoners did not forget bloody crimes they had committed unless they were trying to hide truths from themselves.

Now the danger existed that Elsdon would return to his old self-hatred. Layle said carefully, "Murders rarely take place for only one reason."

Elsdon sighed. "Layle, I know that. I know I wouldn't have murdered Sara if my father hadn't bound and beaten me harshly for years. But I also know now that . . . I had a choice. There was a moment when I could have

stopped myself from killing Sara, and I didn't do so." He turned his face, staring in the direction of the unlit sitting chamber. "It makes me wonder whether I am worthy to be a Seeker."

Layle stepped forward then and took Elsdon lightly by both shoulders, forcing the young man to face him. "None of us are completely worthy to hold the power we do, myself least of all. Whatever you have done is small in comparison to what I have done in the past – believe me when I say that." As Elsdon opened his mouth to ask questions Layle had no desire to answer, Layle rushed on: "We are the lucky ones."

"*Lucky* ones?" With his brows drawn low, Elsdon frowned.

Layle nodded. "Weldon Chapman and other Seekers like him who have committed no abuses in their past – they are the ones who find it hardest to remind themselves that they are no better than the prisoners. It's a constant temptation we face as Seekers: to think ourselves superior to the men and women we search. You and I have all the reminder we need that this is not so."

Elsdon's expression grew intense as he thought this through. Layle had to resist the impulse to run his thumb down the skin of Elsdon's flawless cheek, as smooth and pale and perfect as an ivory carving. He was still absorbing with wonder the knowledge that, after so many years of hard-fought restraint, he could now permit himself to touch someone he desired.

Elsdon said, "I don't think that's going to be enough to remind me of how fortunate I am. Layle, I ought to be dead. I *would* have died at the hangman's noose if you hadn't rescued me. And yet, for the past two days, I've been doing my best to destroy you."

"You had what seemed to be good reason. You believed I was abusing this dungeon's prisoners."

Elsdon shook his head so vigorously that his wheat-gold hair peered out from beneath his hood. "It wasn't only that. If you had committed crimes, then I should have treated you like any prisoner should be treated – I should have been concerned about the well-being of your soul. But I wasn't. It's as you said before: I was arrogant. I wanted to think myself

superior to you. Even the knowledge that I had committed kin-murder didn't prevent me from lording myself over you."

Layle said nothing. It was clear enough to him that it was no accident that Elsdon had transferred his affection and his obedience from a father who abused his son to a High Seeker who had darkness dwelling in his soul. It was clear enough also why Elsdon had reacted with vehement hatred when he suspected the High Seeker of using his power to abuse his prisoners. Elsdon's father, who had caused him so much suffering, was far away. Layle was near at hand.

That much was clear; the surprise was that, in the space of a very short time, Elsdon had been able to forgive Layle – had symbolically forgiven his father for all the pain he had undergone at that wretched man's hands. Where had Elsdon found the strength to do that, and where had he found the wisdom to realize the danger he posed to prisoners? Layle was still trying to puzzle that out.

Elsdon said in a low voice, "Layle, you're High Seeker, and everyone says you're the most gifted prison worker in the world. How do you prevent yourself from feeling superior to the prisoners?"

"I remember my dreamings."

Elsdon was silent for a minute. From the corridor came the sound of voices: guards and Seekers from the night shift, making their way to work. Layle did not move. His primary duty lay here, with his former prisoner.

When it became clear that Elsdon would not reply, Layle said quietly, "My dreamings are all I need to remind me that, without a great deal of mercy from people I have known over the years, I would be a justly executed prisoner rather than a man who receives the privilege of helping prisoners to their transformation and rebirth. You will find your own method of retaining gratitude for your good fortune. All of us who become Seekers develop a method to keep this thought in mind."

"The hangman's noose." Elsdon's voice was level. "I have to find a way to keep that image in my mind."

"Perhaps." He released the Seeker-in-Training and stepped back; Elsdon's death was not an image he cared to dwell upon. "However, I have my own noose hanging over me at the moment."

The side of Elsdon's mouth crooked upwards. "You're about to be late to your appointment with the Codifier."

"Precisely."

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The corridor leading from the Seekers' cells to the rest of the inner dungeon was mercifully deserted as Layle and Elsdon departed on that day after, coughing into their fists. Only one furnace stoker could be dimly seen through the black smoke that continually fogged this hallway, despite the best efforts of the dungeon's ventilation system. The stoker was too absorbed in his task to pay attention to the hooded men walking in the opposite direction.

Layle knew that he would not be so lucky once he reached the entry hall. Once again he cursed the designer of the dungeon, who had made the entry hall the primary passage point for anyone trying to reach the offices and the prisoners' cells. At the other end of the corridor lay a second route to that area, added half a century ago, after a fire blocked the entry hall, cutting off all escape by the prisoners and those tending them. That route, however, would take them past the hallway to the rack rooms. Layle did not want Elsdon reminded of the last time they had met in that place, when Layle had been unable to hide his arousal at the sight of a tormented prisoner.

So he must endure the scrutiny of everyone in the entry hall – which would mean most of the night shift, now at the beginning of the evening. He paused at the door leading to the entry hall. Keeping his voice low in order to avoid being overheard by the guards on the other side of the door, he said, "Mr. Taylor, you understand that, outside my living cell, I cannot show you any favoritism."

Elsdon nodded. Most of his face was hidden by the hood, but his eyes appeared unconcerned. "Our relations must be formal when you're on duty.

I realize that, High Seeker; you made that clear when you first offered me your friendship."

Layle had no inner-dungeon duties now, nor would he until he had paid the penalty for his recent attack on a prisoner. But there was no point in emphasizing what they both knew. He waved Elsdon forward, remaining out of sight of the doorway as Elsdon passed into the entry hall. It would not be long before the entire dungeon population discovered that he had taken his Seeker-in-Training as a love-mate, but there was no point in being obvious about it. With luck, the news would trickle out gradually and be thereby dissipated in intensity.

He waited a full three minutes before he went up to the door and rapped on it the complex code that changed weekly, allowing guards to know when a fellow guard or Seeker was entering the inner dungeon. The Eternal Dungeon, whose standards of employment were high, always had a shortage of guards; it was deemed more important to have a pair of guards facing inward, toward the prisoners who might try to escape, than toward the outer dungeon that few invaders ever entered.

He hesitated, and then added his own code, identifying himself as High Seeker. He was not surprised, however, to find that the guards had their blades unsheathed by the time he stepped through the door. He had a reputation, and that reputation had worsened during the past week.

He kept his voice matter-of-fact as he said, "The Codifier is expecting me, I believe."

The guard he was addressing hesitated, and then glanced to the right, toward a point within the entry hall. Layle followed his gaze and was in time to see the dungeon's senior-most guard, Seward Sobel, nod his agreement that the High Seeker should be allowed entrance. Mr. Sobel immediately returned to his conversation with Elsdon Taylor.

Elsdon was inconspicuous in this hall filled with Seekers similarly garbed in black trousers, shirt, and hood. All of the Seekers bore a passing resemblance to the dark-winged bats that were currently rushing through the cavernous hall, heading toward the open gates that would take them to the palace above the dungeon, and then, after a brief flight, through a window always left open for their passage.

None of the Seekers here could pass through those gates themselves, unless on official business, for all had bound themselves by an oath that imprisoned them eternally within the dungeon. Which made the process of living together all the more delicate, Layle had often reflected. If serious quarrels arose between two Seekers, they could not move to separate towns, as might be possible if they lived in the lighted world. They must find a way to endure the sight of each other for the rest of their lives.

The result of this – in addition to the Code's injunction that Seekers treat their prisoners with courtesy – was that Seekers were the politest men whom Layle had ever met in his life. His own innate courtesy, which had earned him stares and sometimes scorn from the torturers in the Hidden Dungeon, was regarded as normal behavior in the Eternal Dungeon.

Guards, on the other hand . . . Layle stared round the entry hall without moving his head, secure in the knowledge that his eye shifts could not be seen this far away by his observers. And observers he had in abundance. While even the junior-most Seekers were making a token effort to ignore his entrance, most of the guards were staring openly at the man who, after a day of being accused of heinous crimes by his new student, had broken the Code by attacking a prisoner.

Layle knew that the story would only have grown in the telling. By now, he was sure, half the guards were certain that he had maliciously beaten, racked, burnt, and raped a prisoner. What else would explain a man of his high title being given six months' suspension?

It would be useless to explain to most of the guards – whose knowledge of the Code tended to be confined to their own duties – that it was precisely because he held such an exalted position that he had been punished so heavily for shoving a prisoner against the wall. If he was permitted to get away with a blatant violation of the Code, no matter how small, then any other Seeker might follow his example.

He could only hope that his own guards, who had witnessed the Code-breaking, would understand this. His gaze drifted back to Mr. Sobel, who was still speaking with Elsdon. At that moment, something Elsdon said made Mr. Sobel's gaze jump over to Layle. For the briefest of moments,

the guard's gaze held the High Seeker's; then Mr. Sobel turned his attention back to Elsdon.

Layle felt his muscles tense. He had known that most of the dungeon inhabitants would disapprove of his new relationship with Elsdon, but he had not considered how this might affect his interactions with his own guards. He wished that Elsdon had left him the opportunity to tell Mr. Sobel himself. He had to admit, though, that it was Elsdon's right to break the news: the Seeker-in-Training and the guard were becoming close friends.

Still, Layle hoped this was not a sign that Elsdon was planning to discuss the matter indiscriminately. Layle frowned. He disliked intensely all forms of gossip; it would lessen his regard for Elsdon if he discovered that the young man engaged in behind-the-back whispers.

Next to him, the door-guard coughed. "You may enter, sir."

He realized, too late, that he was blocking the path of several Seekers who were trying to reach their workplaces. Murmuring an acknowledgment of the guard's words, he took several steps into the entry hall, thinking to himself that he ought to hurry to the Codifier's office. Mr. Daniels's usual hours were from the beginning of the dawn shift to the end of the dusk shift; that he was willing to meet Layle at the beginning of the night shift was a concession, and he would not be pleased by delays. Layle took another step forward.

At that moment, though, Elsdon broke away from Mr. Sobel and walked over to the desk of the Record-keeper, who, amidst all the noise of early-evening conversations, was single-mindedly thumbing through a stack of documents. He ignored Elsdon as the young man halted at the side of his desk.

Layle halted too. He could see only Elsdon's back, and could read nothing from it, but three months of dealing with the Seeker-in-Training had taught him to be wary of Elsdon's unexpected moves.

The Record-keeper finally deigned to look up. "Well?" he said sharply.

"I want to transfer to new living quarters."

Elsdon's voice, which was louder than the Record-keeper's had been, rang clearly through the cavern of the entry hall, echoing against the stone walls. Conversation in the hall stopped abruptly. Layle wasn't surprised. After all that had occurred between himself and Elsdon during the past two days, the observers were probably sure that Elsdon was about to resign from his training and request to be moved to the outer dungeon.

Layle wasn't entirely sure they were wrong. He waited, his stomach clenched, as the Record-keeper smoothly drew a sheet of paper from a stack that looked as though it were about to collapse from its overweening height. "I see," said the Record-keeper in a voice that suggested such requests were a bane upon his life. "And where do you wish to be transferred to?"

"To the High Seeker's cell. He and I are love-mates now."

A collective gasp filled the cavern. Layle raised his eyes to heaven, and then lowered them to hell. No, behind-the-back whispers were evidently not Elsdon Taylor's manner of spreading news.

Elsdon had turned his head to look at Mr. Sobel; judging from the crinkles around his eyes, he was grinning. Mr. Sobel, Layle was relieved to see, had a small smile on his face. All around the entry hall, however, the expressions of astonishment were transmuting, without effort, into expressions of anger and alarm. Some of the guards looked as though they wanted to rush forward and snatch Elsdon away from the dangerous man who had kidnapped his body and soul.

"I see." The Record-keeper's voice was dry. "In that case, you will need to make three copies of this form, and I will require the High Seeker's signature below yours. Under 'reason for transfer,'" he added yet more dryly, "you need only say, 'Private concerns.'"

Elsdon laughed. So did Mr. Sobel. After a minute, so did a number of other guards and Seekers. The tension in the hall lessened somewhat.

Layle let out his breath slowly, and then counted to three high rackings before he walked forward. He had always considered himself the most democratic of High Seekers, often allowing his men independence in their decisions. But he was the one who permitted the independence. He was not

used to having someone under his command alter the course of his life without consulting him.

On the other hand, he was not the sort to create a public fuss either. There was no point now in doing what he had planned to do, namely walk past Elsdon as though there was no connection between the two of them. Pausing as he came abreast of the other man, he laid his hand on Elsdon's shoulder and said quietly, "I'll see you tomorrow. I suggest that you get a full day's rest before you come to see me again."

Elsdon's eyes appeared deceptively innocent as the young Seeker said, "Of course, sir. Whatever you wish."

o—o—o

The network of gossip in the Eternal Dungeon was so well knit that Layle did not have to ask a single person that day how Elsdon's time was spent. Everyone he met told him, often with significantly raised eyebrows.

At the beginning of Elsdon's shift, in the early evening, Weldon Chapman had quizzed the young man on what he knew of the *Code of Seeking* that bound all Seekers. Learning that Elsdon was weak in his remembrance of certain passages, Mr. Chapman had wisely set the Seeker-in-Training to work at memorizing the whole Code by heart. Knowledge of the meaning of the passages would come slowly to Elsdon, Layle knew, and more from experience in living the Code than from lectures, but knowing every word of the Code was a necessary start.

By his midnight break, Elsdon had proceeded much further in the memorization than anyone might have expected. He then asked and received permission to visit the prisoner whom Layle had attacked at the start of the previous evening, after the prisoner spoke vile insults against Elsdon. The prisoner, as it happened, was a former guard who had purported to be a friend of Elsdon's.

From all accounts, the interview did not go well. The prisoner ended up shouting insults at Elsdon at the top of his lungs. Elsdon kept Seekerly cool throughout the verbal attack. Mr. Chapman finally intervened, barring Elsdon from further visits, no doubt to the relief of the Seeker-in-Training.

Elsdon's pre-dawn hours were spent in the guardroom, being trained for hand-to-hand combat by Layle's senior night guard, Seward Sobel. Seekers were forbidden from touching prisoners, but many prisoners over the years had not held such qualms themselves. Although a Seeker's first required act, upon being physically attacked, was to try to retreat and call for help from his guards, sometimes such help was delayed long enough that a Seeker must defend himself. Since Seekers carried no weapons, they were taught how to fight with their hands and feet, and how to disable an armed opponent.

This was a dangerous moment in many Seekers' training, for Layle was hardly the only Seeker who had arrived at the Eternal Dungeon with violence in his past. But here too the accounts all agreed: Elsdon had behaved properly during his first session of defense training, using neither too much force nor too little.

Learning hand-to-hand combat was an exhausting ordeal, so Layle was not surprised to learn that Elsdon had taken his advice to sleep alone before coming to see the High Seeker. Layle himself slept fitfully. His first night in suspension had been far from pleasant.

The Codifier, having scorched Layle to the bones on the previous evening for his lamentable loss of temper with a prisoner, had now turned his attention, inevitably, to Layle's conduct with the dungeon's newest Seeker-in-Training. Mr. Daniels reminded Layle, with merciless thoroughness, of what events had led to the dungeon's last loss of a Seeker-in-Training, and how Layle had sworn, after that episode, that he would never again choose a Seeker under his training to be his love-mate. Indeed, he had gone so far as to pledge to take no love-mates ever after, though Mr. Daniels had dryly indicated on that occasion that the Code did not require celibacy of the dungeon's High Seekers, and that he saw no danger in Layle bonding himself with another senior Seeker who was of his own age.

And now Layle had breached his promise. It did not help that Mr. Daniels was of the new way of thinking in such matters, believing that it was wrong for any man to take a male love-mate unless his partner was of equal rank and age. Layle had been raised to believe otherwise. He had worried about the fact that Elsdon was so much under his power as a

Seeker-in-Training, but it had not occurred to him to worry about the fact that Elsdon was half his age.

Now he forced himself to think the matter through. Though he could say, with all honesty, that he believed he would have fallen in love with Elsdon if their ages had been reversed, he had to admit to himself that Elsdon's youth – the contrast between his innocence and Layle's maturity – was part of what made him appealing to Layle. And the more Layle thought about it, the more this fact alarmed him. Did he want Elsdon innocent so that Layle could care for him, could train him in the skills he would need during his manhood? Or did Layle simply want a love-mate who was too innocent to fight back against any abuse inflicted upon him? And even if Layle's motives were pure, what would happen in a few years when Elsdon entered fully into his manhood? Already, Elsdon was showing signs that he was Layle's equal in emotional strength. Perhaps one day he would be stronger than Layle. Would Layle's love for him die when that happened?

By late morning, Layle gave up the attempt to sleep and went to see Weldon Chapman. The Seeker who normally supervised the dungeon's day shift – and was now thrust into the position of supervising the entire dungeon – looked haggard. Although another, lower-ranked senior Seeker had been given direct supervision over the day shift, the man who supervised the entire dungeon necessarily had erratic hours, being on call at any moment when he should be needed. Mr. Chapman, Layle knew, had now spent more than two days and nights awake as he rescheduled the shifts of Seekers and guards to take into account Layle's absence, as well as supervising the training of a young Seeker whom Layle, by all rights, should have been in charge of.

Nonetheless, Mr. Chapman had his report ready. Although Layle officially had no inner-dungeon duties during his suspension and would be expected to spend most of his six months assisting with work in the outer dungeon, it was nonetheless necessary that Mr. Chapman keep Layle informed of what was taking place in the inner dungeon so that Layle could smoothly return to his work as High Seeker when the suspension was complete.

Much of Mr. Chapman's report centered upon Elsdon. The young Seeker was proceeding well, Mr. Chapman informed Layle. After an exceedingly shaky start, he seemed to be focussing his mind on his work tasks.

Assuming that his mind was not distracted by any further traumatic events, Elsdon Taylor ought to succeed in completing his training.

Mr. Chapman added no further commentary to his report; he had no need to. Layle returned to his cell and spent several hours thinking hard, fingering a couple of thick, lengthy ropes that he was considering having the dungeon's guards use as bindings for future prisoners, in place of the leather straps that were currently used. By the time Elsdon arrived at his door, two hours before the beginning of the dusk shift, Layle was ready for him.

Elsdon entered the High Seeker's living cell by way of the key that Layle had given him, shedding clothes the moment he closed the door. He had kicked off his boots within three steps of his arrival, had his shirt knots untied within six, and by the time he reached where Layle sat in his armchair, he was busy sweeping off his hood to reveal the golden-brown hair underneath.

Layle felt a swelling at the groin, which he ignored. "What are you doing?" he asked in the calm, cool voice that invariably made dungeon dwellers nervous.

Elsdon merely smiled. "Getting ready for bed."

The Seeker-in-Training had just come from bed, but Layle did not ask the obvious. Instead he said in that same cool voice, "Your presumption is remarkable."

Elsdon's hands paused on his belt-knot; his eyes searched Layle's face. Layle kept his expression unrevealing. He remained motionless in his seat, the position of a High Seeker interviewing a wayward student.

"Is something wrong?" Elsdon asked finally.

"If you must ask, then that is a sign that something is indeed very wrong. When did I give you permission to move into this cell?"

Elsdon's hands dropped from his belt. He opened his mouth, hesitated, and then said, "I thought—"

"You thought. Yes. Who gave you permission to refer to me as your love-mate?"

"But you said—" Elsdon halted himself this time. Layle waited patiently for him to retrace his way to the non-existent moment when the High Seeker had spoken that word. Layle had been very careful not to speak the word; he had been allowing all initiative to come from Elsdon's side.

Now he would turn that initiative into a weapon against the Seeker-in-Training.

"You didn't use the word," Elsdon said carefully, "but every conversation we held yesterday rested on the assumption—"

"So you announced to the entire dungeon that I was your love-mate. Who gave you permission to gossip about us like an old woman?"

That blow was unmistakable. The blood rushed into Elsdon's face. Layle felt another swelling at the groin, accompanied by a faint sickness in his stomach. He ignored both sensations.

"If you had thought the matter through clearly," Layle continued, not holding back the blows now that he was started, "it might have occurred to you that I had my doubts about you. It might have occurred to you that you're too young, too inexperienced – or rather, experienced in the wrong way."

A blow straight between the legs. This time Elsdon turned white. The swelling at Layle's groin could no longer be ignored, and he began to cross his legs to hide it. Then he changed his mind. Let Elsdon see the effects of this conversation on the High Seeker. That would bring the conversation to an end all the quicker.

"I have no need for a gossip," Layle declared. "A presumptuous, arrogant gossip who assumes that, because he has received the privilege of one night with me, he may bond himself to me. Had it occurred to you that I might be testing you?"

He hoped it did not occur to Elsdon that every sentence he had spoken was either a hypothetical statement or a question. The *Code of Seeking* required that no direct lie be told to a prisoner, but Seekers could

indirectly mislead prisoners by asking them questions and making hypothetical statements that the prisoners would read in the wrong way. Layle indeed had no need for a presumptuous, arrogant gossip. With any luck, Elsdon would draw the wrong conclusion and never realize how desperately Layle needed him.

Elsdon's face remained as white as ashes. Layle hoped that the color arose from rage. He had no desire to inflict permanent damage on Elsdon – or rather, he had the desire but would not allow himself to indulge it. All that he wanted here was to raise Elsdon's anger to the point where the young Seeker stormed out of the cell, breaking off their bond of his own will. Better that, than a protracted argument between them.

Elsdon's gaze shifted over Layle's face; Layle kept it impassive, though he was beginning to wish that he had kept the face-cloth of his hood down. That was the purpose of the hood: to hide a Seeker's emotions from the prisoner. This prisoner was far too skilled at reading expressions for Layle's peace of mind.

Suddenly Elsdon knelt at Layle's feet. Layle's hardness jumped against his belly; his mouth went dry.

"You're scared," Elsdon said quietly.

He found he could not speak. He should have anticipated that this would happen; it had happened far too many times when Elsdon was his prisoner.

For a prisoner to turn the tables on his Seeker was not unknown. Every Seeker had experienced, with chagrin, the moment when a prisoner took control of the conversation. Even Layle had occasionally been the unfortunate victim in such cases.

But when a prisoner took control, it was invariably in order to attack his Seeker. Not until three months ago had Layle encountered, for the first time, a prisoner who turned the tables in order to search and transform his Seeker.

When he had discovered that Elsdon was committing the same act with the High Seeker's normally impenetrable senior night guard, Layle had known

that Elsdon possessed the gifts of a Seeker. It had not occurred to him, though, that Elsdon might exercise those gifts when they were in private.

And yet he should have known. Elsdon had done it once before, on the night when they made love. Layle could have cursed himself.

"They've been telling you all day that you shouldn't take me as your love-mate, haven't they?" Elsdon voice was gentle. "I know how it is – my acquaintances have been saying the same to me. Not all of them, but enough to frighten me. They've been telling me spook tales about what you'd do to me in bed. We'll just have to find a way to overcome our fears. Seward says that every couple is afraid at the beginning of a bonding."

He found his tongue finally. "Mr. Taylor, I am ending this absurd arrangement. Now."

"But you can't." Elsdon kept his voice soft. "Love, I know that you're used to issuing orders as High Seeker, but that's not how matters work here. We both agreed to become love-mates, so we both need to agree if we're to end our mateship."

"That's ridiculous!" He could feel control slipping from him with every word he spoke, an unpleasant sensation bringing back long-buried memories of his capture and imprisonment at the end of his years as a murderer. "You could leave me at any moment, against my wish."

"And that's what you're afraid of."

The blow of Elsdon's words stopped the breath in his throat. He could feel his skin turn cold as the blood drained from it. Elsdon reached forward and took his hand.

"Love, I understand why you're afraid," he said, his voice still soft. "Every man you've approached with love in the past has ended up rejecting you. It's natural for you to assume that the same will happen with me. But I told you last night: I won't leave you."

He closed his eyes. He could feel hot wetness pricking at the sides of his eyes. Gods below and above, he would not allow himself to weep again in Elsdon's presence. He opened his eyes and said, in as steady a voice as he could manage, "They were right to leave me. Elsdon, I'm a danger to you."

The side of Elsdon's mouth crooked upward. "Good. Danger is what I need in my life."

An innocent answer, Layle reflected. He considered telling Elsdon of all that he was, of all that he had done in his past. That would certainly drive the young man away; it nearly drove Layle's soul from his body whenever he contemplated his past. But he could not risk harming Elsdon that far. If he had confessed to Elsdon two nights ago, when the other man pledged his love . . . But he had not, and now Elsdon would know, not only how much evil lay within Layle, but also that Layle had hidden something vitally important from him.

He could not risk breaking Elsdon beyond mending. However much part of him wanted to.

On impulse, he reached forward and grabbed Elsdon's hair, pulling the younger Seeker's head back so that his neck was bared to Layle's mercy. Elsdon's gasp burned in his belly like wildfire. He leaned forward and just managed to keep himself from biting off a chunk of Elsdon's throat. Instead, he nibbled his way down, tasting the sweetness of the sweat that had suddenly sprung to the surface. Elsdon's continued gasps turned his hardness to iron.

By the time he released Elsdon's hair, Layle was breathing deeply. He waited while Elsdon wiped the tears off his face. Then Layle said, in a voice as cold as his body was hot, "Well? Is this what you wanted?"

When Elsdon looked up at him, his face held an expression of such inflexible stubbornness that all of Layle's fighting instincts sprang into a position, poised for battle.

Elsdon's voice was quiet, though, as he said, "Because of what my father did to me, I can't bear having my body held captive. You know that. But you wouldn't have done that to me if you weren't trying to scare me away."

"Elsdon, you don't know what I'd do to you. I could destroy you, and you wouldn't even know what I was doing until it was too late—"

"I doubt that."

Unwonted confidence. Elsdon was only eighteen, Layle reminded himself. The youth was at an age when he thought he could survive all ordeals. All that was needed here was proof that Elsdon was wrong.

All of Layle's heat was replaced in a single moment by coldness in the cavern of his stomach. To do what he had just done was risk enough, but to prove to Elsdon how much danger he was in . . . Could Layle control himself throughout such a test?

He must.

He was still trying to decide which path he should take when Elsdon blurted out, "I'm clean."

"Clean?" Layle stared blankly at his love-mate for a moment; then he noticed that Elsdon's ears were turning pink.

Elsdon licked his lips with a nervous twitch as he lowered his eyes. "I felt like a fool last time, not knowing half of what we were doing. So I asked Seward to tell me what I needed to know. He said he hadn't slept with a man since he was a year or so younger than me, but he passed on what he remembered. And he . . . he showed me where the hose was in the guards' washroom." Elsdon raised his eyes; his entire face was pink now.

The path unrolled below Layle's feet, as though he had planned this. At that moment, without warning, Elsdon leaned forward and licked the cloth over the bulge in Layle's trousers.

Layle took in a deep breath and held it as he felt the soft warmth of Elsdon's tongue glide over his clothed shaft. He knew that there many rumors in the Eternal Dungeon concerning his sexuality. One of those rumors was that he was unable to go cock-high except with the aid of his dreamings. Elsdon had already figured out that this was far from true.

What remained true was that the High Seeker could not reach the zenith of his desire except by dreaming that he was abusing his bed-partner . . . or actually doing so.

He reached forward.

o—o—o

Elsdon was heavy, but no heavier than other prisoners he had carried over the years. What was disconcerting was how the young man seemed to know instinctively how to arouse Layle. He let his head loll against Layle's chest, as though he were drugged or too badly injured to be able to resist the High Seeker. Layle's heartbeat thumped hard like a lash.

He laid Elsdon on his back on the bed, which still had its covers pulled back from when he had arisen from his restless sleeplessness. He knew how he would have proceeded if this were the Hidden Dungeon and he were ordered to treat a prisoner gently. Binding the prisoner's hands behind his back, he would have sat on his victim's chest and slapped him over and over, until the prisoner pleaded for mercy. He would have slapped the prisoner more, until his victim understood that he would receive no mercy in this place.

Then he would have twisted and bitten the prisoner's nipples until the prisoner's face was drowning in tears. Finally, he would have jerked the prisoner's trousers and drawers from his body, laying his nakedness open to whatever devices Layle chose to use.

He contented himself with jerking Elsdon's trousers and drawers from his body. He had learned on the night of their lovemaking that the young man did not mind a certain amount of roughness in bed, provided that his body was not held captive in any way. So Layle was not particularly surprised to see Elsdon's shaft spring up as he pulled off the cloth. Elsdon was doing his best to hide a smile.

Layle allowed himself to stare down for a minute upon the flawless ivory skin, lightly furred with blond hair; the nut-brown sac lying quietly between the legs; the slenderly powerful muscles in arm and thigh; the scars that curved round from the buttocks. The last made his loins alight like a furnace.

Elsdon was not succeeding now in keeping the smile from his face. Looking down at his grin, Layle wondered whether, if he and Elsdon remained together for another twenty years or more, he would ever take the other man for granted. He had heard that such things happened among long-term love-mates – that someone who seemed fresh and all-important

grew stale eventually through familiarity. After a few years, he supposed, he would barely notice if Elsdon stripped himself like this.

It scarcely mattered. He would not have the opportunity to test the strength of his love.

"Do you trust me?" he asked softly.

Elsdon's grin disappeared, but his nod came without hesitation. Layle had known that it would. He waited a moment to allow Elsdon to qualify his acquiescence; when the young man did not, Layle turned and walked toward the night-stand.

That piece of furniture usually stood next to his bed, but after the previous evening's incident, he had pulled it over to the side of the room, lest Elsdon startle him out of his sleep again. In addition to a black volume, the night-stand currently held a bottle of lamp-oil, a box of matches, a towel, a basin, and a water jug, filled to the brim.

He scooped a bit of water onto his finger and tasted it. It was blood-warm but fresh. The maid had left the water only a short time before, during her usual mid-afternoon visit, bringing a clean chamber-pot as well.

Layle paid no attention to that pot as he rummaged inside the shelves of the night-stand. He had used the pot shortly before the maid arrived; he had no doubt, from what Elsdon had said before, that the Seeker-in-Training had similarly refreshed himself. Layle's interest lay in another item within the night-stand: a yellow bar of lemon soap.

The water was warm enough that the soap melted easily. Layle's scrubbed his hands and forearms thoroughly. A new theory was drifting amongst the members of the Healing Guild that washing one's hands before surgery cut down on the number of deaths that occurred in the period following the surgery. The theory made sense to Layle; he could well imagine that grains of grime, hidden under fingernails or in the folds of the skin, might end up lodging within the patient and impede the already delicate chances that a patient would recover from having his flesh cut open.

Mr. Bergsen, the Eternal Dungeon's healer, thought the theory was poppycock. He and Layle had argued the matter at length one day, while

Mr. Bergsen brought out statistics based on his own eight years as an army surgeon, back in his youth.

Finally Layle had said, in a flat voice, "I've been inside more bodies than you have."

Mr. Bergsen's mouth had opened. Nothing had emerged. After a painful minute, the healer had changed the subject.

Now Layle carefully examined his fingernails. He had deliberately kept them long during his years in the Hidden Dungeon; long nails were so very helpful if one should need to gouge out eyes. By contrast, in the Eternal Dungeon he had always kept his fingernails well trimmed. Still, he was dissatisfied with what he saw. After another rummage through the night-stand, he found what he was looking for and spent a minute sandpapering the ends of his nails.

Finally he was ready. He turned round. Elsdon had not moved, other than to tilt his head to watch Layle. The young man was squinting, and a frown had travelled onto his face.

For a moment, Layle thought Elsdon had guessed. Then he realized that the problem lay in the lack of light. Layle burned less oil than any other inhabitant of the inner dungeon; his eyesight was so acute that he rarely needed more than one lamp alight in his cell. At the moment, the only lamp dribbling light into the bedroom was the one he had left in the sitting room.

He turned back to the night-stand and reached toward the lamp-oil there. As he did so, his eye drifted over to the black volume next to it. He hesitated, then opened the *Code of Seeking* and let his finger fall aimlessly on a passage. It was an old game among Seekers; they did this playfully, to see what their fortunes would be for that day.

The sentence he touched was written in his own blunt words: "Pain is sometimes necessary for a prisoner to recognize the truth."

He had written those words in memory of his own painful awakening to the truth about himself. For Elsdon, he knew, the pain would need to come

in another way. He hoped he was right in believing that the pain was necessary.

Closing the book, he took up the oil and a match, and carried them over to the paraffin lamp that was attached to the wall next to his bed. Elsdon watched him silently, with his shaft still poking up, as though he were trying to catch Layle's attention. Layle refilled the lamp, lit the flame, and was just setting the empty bottle aside when he remembered.

His gaze flew toward the open doorway to the sitting room. There, inconspicuous on the floor, lay another empty bottle, one that had held lovemaking lubricant two nights ago, before he had depleted it.

Layle closed his eyes. Through gritted teeth, he said, "I did not write this play as a comedy."

"High Seeker?" Elsdon's voice sounded puzzled.

Layle did not open his eyes. The lubricant, he decided, would probably not have been slick enough in any case; it would have dried too easily. What he needed was grease of some sort. In the Hidden Dungeon, abundant supplies of grease had always been available.

But this was not the Hidden Dungeon. He could hardly go to the Eternal Dungeon's healer and ask him for grease taken from the latest corpse of a prisoner.

Elsdon coughed. Opening his eyes, Layle saw that the young man's ears had turned pink again. After examining his expression for a moment, Layle sighed heavily. "Where is it this time?"

Elsdon turned even pinker. "Just outside the door. Seward was planning to use it on his wedding night, but he told me that I could—"

Layle did not wait to hear more. He headed toward the door that led to the inner-dungeon corridor outside his cell.

He paused at the threshold, coughing as he so often did at the presence of the smoke from the open furnaces that ran alongside the corridor, heating the prisoners' cells. The furnaces had been installed when he was still a junior Seeker, at his suggestion. At the time, it had seemed an

improvement over the old, dangerous stoves that had previously heated each prisoner's cell.

Now the furnaces were an archaism, a reminder of an older era. He and Elsdon had had their first fight over those furnaces, one week after Elsdon was released from his imprisonment. It had been Layle's first warning that life with Elsdon would be far from easy.

Layle sighed. No doubt the young Seeker was right, and he should heat the dungeon by more modern methods, such as flues admitting hot air from a central, steam-powered furnace. The Eternal Dungeon had long been noted for its stubborn adherence to tradition; it was still using methods of torture that had existed for centuries. Matters had only grown worse since the Eternal Dungeon elevated to the High Seekership a man who – unbeknownst to most of the dungeon inhabitants – had been born and raised in the Kingdom of Vovim, which had not yet been touched by the industrial revolution that was sweeping through neighboring nations.

Machines broke in Layle's presence; that was what the matter came down to. He had lost track of how many racks had mysteriously ceased to function while he was using them. Even oil lamps had been known to fizzle and die when he walked near them. Toilets backed up, guns carried by visiting soldiers backfired, and the laborers in the outer dungeon's kitchen had long ago begged their High Seeker not to come near the ovens, which had a tendency to turn cold at his approach.

Layle sighed again as he stooped to pick up the tin lying on the floor beside the door. By the time he died, he supposed, the Eternal Dungeon would still be lost in the distant past, unwilling to take advantage of all the modern wonders that the Queendom of Yclau now had to offer. It was just as well that tonight he would need no machinery other than what his own body had to offer.

He unscrewed the lid of the tin and sniffed the contents, then scooped out a bit of them with his fingers and licked what lay there. Vegetable grease, he decided; he had tasted it in meals often enough. It would not have occurred to him to use it in the bedroom. Mr. Sobel was a forward-thinking man; little wonder that Layle's senior night guard got along so well with Elsdon.

Elsdon was where he had left him, lying naked on the bed. Or rather, not quite as Layle had left him, for, in the short space of time Layle had been gone, Elsdon had managed somehow to tie Layle's two ropes tautly between the high railing at the head of the bed and the equally high railing at the foot of the bed. They shadowed the bed now like a canopy. Elsdon's legs were draped over both the ropes, leaving his bottom wide open to Layle's use.

Layle paused at the doorway, trying to figure out what sort of engineering skill it would take to have arranged this setting in so short a time. Then he shook his head. "Thank the gods you weren't born in Vovim," he muttered.

"Layle?" Elsdon's forehead creased with clear puzzlement at this use of a Vovimian oath. He had propped up his head with a pillow, and Layle could see his face, flushed and sweaty after his strenuous exercise.

Layle felt himself stir then. Elsdon grinned, obviously pleased by this testimony to his engineering skills. Layle did not bother to explain that he was stirred by Elsdon's exhaustion, so similar to the exhaustion of the many prisoners that had fallen into his hands in the Hidden Dungeon. Instead he stepped onto the bed, carefully stepped his way over one of the ropes holding Elsdon's legs aloft in the air, and knelt in the narrow space between the ropes. He opened the jar.

Elsdon showed no surprise as Layle carefully covered the fingers of his right hand in the grease. Layle had not supposed that he would. Until two nights before, Elsdon had been a virgin, and a singularly ill-educated virgin, at that. He probably thought that finger-opening was the ordinary method by which men began each session of making love.

Perhaps it was, when men made love; Layle wouldn't know. In the Hidden Dungeon, he had only used his fingers to open up virgins he wished to seduce. Now he had a different exercise in mind.

Elsdon had closed his eyes, preparing himself for what was come. This allowed Layle to finish his own preparations without causing any due puzzlement from the young Seeker. The tin was nearly empty by the time he was through, but that made no difference. He would only be doing this once.

His first finger, pushed in slowly and gently, caused Elsdon to sigh and nuzzle the pillow with his cheek, like a calf seeking milk from its mother. Layle's gentleness was scarcely needed; Elsdon was as wide open to him now as the arms of a joyful wife welcoming home her long-lost husband. Layle added a second finger, and then, after a short while, a third.

This one created resistance; he paused to allow Elsdon time to relax further. He could feel, tender under his fingers, the soft walls of the cavity that lay within – "The softest walls in a man's body," the master torturer who had trained him at the Hidden Dungeon had once told him, before showing him what could be done to those walls.

Four fingers; still, Elsdon showed no sign that he was aware of what Layle was planning. Layle wondered whether he thought his love-mate had entered him now in the conventional manner. Once, out of curiosity, Layle had asked his fellow apprentice at the Hidden Dungeon to enter him – a safe enough request, since he knew that this sort of exercise bored Millard, unless it was done to a prisoner. Indeed, Millard had been hard put to keep back his yawns long enough to offer his commentary on what he was doing. It was surprisingly difficult for Layle to guess from feel alone which objects Millard had inserted into his body, a fact that Layle had stored in his memory as useful to his work.

Afterwards, he had offered to allow Millard the same opportunity, an offer which Millard refused with such brusqueness that Layle had immediately known far more about Millard than his fellow apprentice had ever intended for him to know. But that was long ago; Millard, he supposed, was now working as a master torturer in the Hidden Dungeon, undoubtedly hating the apprentice he had once helped to train. Layle wondered sometimes why his mind continued to dwell on that torturer, who epitomized all that he had sought to escape by coming to the Eternal Dungeon.

He was allowing his mind to wander, which was dangerous in his present situation – indeed, deadly. He stroked the walls with his fingers again. Were they warmer than before? Warmth would mean blood, and blood would mean that tension was building in Elsdon. But the cavity remained the same temperature it had been from the beginning. He pulled out

slightly, tucked his thumb into his palm, curved his hand like a saber, and pushed in his whole hand.

He entered as smoothly as a honed blade entering a wound. Never before, in his long experience, had one of his captives opened himself so readily to Layle. This, despite the fact that Layle's skill at seduction had been spoken of in awed whispers by his fellow apprentices – and, on occasion, by the master torturers. Any prisoner he chose, for his amusement, to seduce before executing, accepted him willingly; but always there was that resistance at the beginning, from sheer unfamiliarity of taking anything so large into their cavity.

He felt no resistance here, other than the usual one of making it past the rings at the entrance. Elsdon's shaft remained stiff, but it rested heavy against his body now. The young man was breathing deeply, his eyes still closed, his hands folded calmly over his stomach.

Layle was breathing deeply too. Iron was against his belly again as he envisioned what he could do in the moments before Elsdon realized what was happening. But it was always better to wait. The moment when the prisoner realized what had happened, and guessed what would follow, was always the best.

He used the minute to try to feel the shape of what lay within. Each man or woman or child he had entered was shaped differently; with some it was best to keep his hand as it was, curved. But with Elsdon, he could tell, there was room enough to move. He began to sharpen the curve, his fingers and palm coming together like pincers on flesh; he could hear Elsdon's breath turn ragged as Layle's fingers expanded the walls of his cavity. For a moment, Layle thought he felt his nails scrape against the wall, creating a long, beautiful wound. But no blood followed; instead, his fingers closed down on his palm, and he was able to create a fist.

He felt warmth flood around his fist, like the gush of hot fluid a pregnant woman gives out at the birth of a child, or when she has been stabbed in the stomach by her torturer. Even before Layle felt Elsdon's rings clamp down upon his wrist, he knew that the other man had realized what he was doing.

He raised his eyes. The young Seeker's face, always cream in color, had turned yet more pale. His shaft had shrivelled and shrunk, as though trying to hide itself. His lips were parted in a wordless plea. Layle held his eyes for a long moment, allowing Elsdon to realize what might come next – to realize also how easily Layle had placed his love-mate's life under threat, without Elsdon's guessing what was happening.

"Submit," Layle said quietly.

Elsdon did so in an instant, his body relaxing to accept whatever Layle gave him, though the warmth of his tension remained. Layle was not surprised. Elsdon had trained himself, at a very young age, to accept pain at the hands of his father; it would take some time before he learned to defy orders, even ones that threatened his life. And he had just made it possible, through his acquiescence, that he would not be permitted that much time in his life.

Layle could see from Elsdon's expression that he understood all this – that he now saw how few defenses he had against the High Seeker's skill at destruction. In his mind's eye, Layle envisioned the journey ahead: the slow travel of his fist through the winding cavity within Elsdon's body, till he had nearly reached Elsdon's heart, and then the moment when he pummelled Elsdon, wrenching the deepest part of Elsdon apart and sending him into agonizing death.

When his vision cleared again, he saw the fear in Elsdon's face. The young man knew well enough what it meant when Layle's gaze grew distant. And this time, unlike the last, the High Seeker had offered no guarantee that he would not act on his dreamings. Indeed, he had warned quite the opposite.

Yet still Elsdon lay acquiescent, unbound by anything except his own willingness to accept whatever Layle gave him. The perfect victim, his skin covered with sweat, shining bright in the lamplight like a treasure waiting to be plundered.

Layle closed his eyes and began to move his fist.

It was some minutes before Elsdon finally spoke. By the time he did, Layle had picked up the towel on the night-stand and was using it to wipe off the grease on his right arm. He could see clearly the line upon his

wrist, showing the place where he had stopped in his journey into Elsdon's body.

He was still breathing heavily, his shaft as angry as a wound at being denied its satisfaction. Because of this, Elsdon had to repeat his question twice before Layle took in what he was saying.

He replied, without looking back, "At a brothel."

"Surely not!" Elsdon sounded shocked, and understandably so. Two generations before, Yclau's brothels had been reformed to rid them of children who might be taken advantage of by the patrons. Now only grown women who had chosen this profession sold themselves there; young men under the age of twenty-one were not permitted entrance, either to sell or to buy. Layle himself had never visited an Yclau brothel, for he had barely turned eighteen when he left the lighted world to make his home in the Eternal Dungeon.

Vovimian brothels were quite different, but Layle did not bother to explain this. "Not through my own experience. A tor—" He caught himself just in time and amended, "I learned this technique from a guard at the prison where I last worked. It was quite popular at the house of pleasure he had visited regularly before he was employed by the prison." And was popular at every other brothel in Vovim, but there was no need to tell Elsdon that either.

"Then it isn't used to kill?"

He turned slowly. Elsdon was lying on his side now, facing Layle; his legs were folded and hugged up against his chest. His face was still pale.

Layle said nothing, and Elsdon added, "If it was common at this brothel, I don't see how it could have been used as a murder weapon. A whore-mistress would hardly want to go to the expense to hire new women to replace the ones who had died, and she would have faced murder charges if anything had happened to her women."

Not in Vovim, where nobody took notice of a dead prostitute, and where it was easy enough for a whore-master to renew his stock by buying a boy for a few pennies from his starving parents. But Layle could not say this,

so he only replied, "Danger exists, regardless as to whether killing is intended. High prices are charged for this technique."

The moment he spoke, he knew he had made a mistake, even before Elsdon's face lit up like the flames of the reborn. Layle had forgotten, for a moment, that he was supposed to have lived all his life in Yclau.

In Vovim, prostitutes had no rights. They did as they were told to by their whore-masters, or they were thrown on the streets, usually to starve, for they received none of the money that their whore-masters charged to patrons. In Yclau, on the other hand, prostitutes chose freely their patrons and their acts, and they received all but a percentage of their earnings. The whore-mistresses were there only as a guild official, to ensure that work conditions were maintained at a high level and that the women received fair treatment under Yclau's laws.

"So they must enjoy doing it," Elsdon said, drawing the obvious conclusion as he sat up, brushing back with his arm one of the ropes that still canopied the bed. "Otherwise, they wouldn't offer to do it."

Layle tossed the grease-covered towel aside, trying to figure out how to wind his way out of the maze of lies he had created. Even if Elsdon could be told the truth, the truth was not simple. Layle knew well enough, from his own experiments, that his travels into the depths of his prisoners could give enjoyment to the prisoners. That was the reason he had chosen this as a method of seduction. The brute force would come later, when the prisoner grew unwary.

He sighed, drawing the back of his hand over his forehead and leaving a streak of grease there. "Elsdon," he said, his normally level voice cracking, "have you not understood what's been happening here?"

"I understand," Elsdon said in the soft voice that had initially fooled Layle into thinking the youth was entirely powerless. "I understand that you just offered yourself the greatest temptation you've ever received, and you refused to allow yourself to act on it."

Layle stared. Elsdon smiled. "Love," he said, his voice as warm as his body had been, "don't you see that everything you've done since I entered this cell today has only increased my faith in you? I've sometimes doubted

whether you willed good toward me – to my shame, I doubted it a short time ago. But I've never doubted your ability to control yourself. Even now, you could destroy me at a whim, through words alone. I know you have that ability; I've heard the tales about you. And yet you've done nothing to harm me, not in any lasting way." His smile faded, and his voice grew more serious. "I won't leave you, Layle. You'd have to drive me away, and you won't do that, because it would hurt me too much."

Layle closed his eyes. Behind them, swimming like images in a sea, he could see the destruction he had envisioned wreaking upon Elsdon. The destruction lay there, within his reach.

He opened his eyes. Elsdon continued to sit there, deceptively still.

"Too late," Layle said, his voice breaking again.

"Too late?" The other Seeker frowned.

"I wondered what would happen between us on the day when your emotional strength surpassed mine. It's too late for me to worry about that."

For the first time, Elsdon looked uncertain. "I didn't think . . . Layle, I thought this was something you'd want me to do. Something any Seeker would do for a friend."

Layle's mouth quirked as he walked forward. "No Seeker has ever been fool enough to try to break me. No Seeker would have succeeded if he'd tried. Elsdon, I pity Weldon Chapman. Training you will be like training a wild cub that's just discovered its strength."

Elsdon laughed as Layle sat down beside him. Layle responded by drawing Elsdon into his arm. The young Seeker rested his head on his love-mate's shoulder, for all the world as though Layle had been the one offering comfort.

The gesture seemed oddly natural. Stroking Elsdon's hair, Layle said, "I knew what you were by the time I came to love you. Your mixture of strength and submission is part of what made me love you. I just didn't realize at the time how much power that gave you over me, Seeker-in-Training." Then, as Elsdon stirred uneasily within his arm, Layle kissed

the top of his head. "I think I can reassure the Codifier now that I have mated myself to a man who is my equal in rank, in all the ways that matter most. . . . You still have much to learn, though. You let matters slip out of your control here, which would be dangerous if I were a prisoner. I'm glad," he said, his voice turning dry, "that I won't play a totally useless role in your life."

Elsdon laughed softly. "Hardly, High Seeker. You have the experience I lack, and I expect to learn from you. So you trust me?"

"With my life." His arm tightened briefly round Elsdon.

"You believe I won't leave you?"

That was a harder question to answer. "If ever the time comes when I grow more dangerous to you than I am now, you would be wise to leave me. But until then . . ." He drew in his breath deeply, feeling, for the first time, the sharpness of the cool air of the dungeon. "Until then, I believe that you wish to stay with me, and I won't try to dissuade you again." He reached back toward the blanket to draw it over Elsdon's shoulders, realizing that the young man, so new to the dungeon, was probably a good deal more chilled than Layle would be if he were stripped naked in this room.

"Good," said Elsdon, with the relief of a man who has set aside a trivial dispute. "Then you won't mind doing whatever-you-call-that to me again?"

His hand stilled on the blanket. He looked over at his love-mate, who was waiting. "Elsdon, don't make mock in such matters."

"I'm quite serious, love."

Indeed, he looked as serious as he had been since the conversation began. Layle drew in breath, tried to speak, and fell silent.

"It's dangerous." Elsdon spoke the words for him. "Deadly dangerous if something should go wrong. Layle, you haven't been listening to what I've been saying. I told you, danger is what I need in my life."

He retraced the conversation back to its source and recognized the moment that – from Elsdon's perspective – their discussion had gone astray from

the more important topic he had been raising. Then Layle traced the conversation back further, to its origins.

He stared at the young Seeker, finding it difficult to believe he had read the other man's thoughts correctly. "Elsdon," he said slowly, "there are safer ways to keep images of death in mind than by dancing with death."

"But this is the way you chose, and this way works for me." Elsdon's voice was deeply serious now, as though he were discussing the fate of a prisoner. "Layle, I can't afford to risk thinking myself superior again to any prisoner. A prisoner could die needlessly if I did that, or I could fail to guide him to rebirth. Risking my life for a prisoner . . . Isn't that what the Code teaches us to do? And the risk can't be that great, or the prostitutes would never do this – nor would you have done it to me, even to frighten me."

He stared at the wall, trying to think of an answer to make. It was true enough that, out of the dozens of prisoners he had done this to, none had begun to die until the moment he set out to kill them. His skill was too great for that. But on the slim chance that he should make a mistake . . .

"That's what I need," Elsdon said softly. "That small chance. Not a large one – it would be foolish to throw my life away needlessly. But a small chance of dying, every now and then, to remind me of how great my fortune is, and how little I deserve that fortune. Layle, the moment when I realized what you were doing and thought I might die . . . that was the moment when I felt more like a Seeker than in any moment since I became one. I saw my death, and I knew that, if I was permitted the opportunity, I would do everything I could to bring my prisoners to rebirth."

He was silent. Elsdon had offered him the only argument he could not counter: that what he did would benefit Elsdon's prisoners. Finally he met the other man's eyes.

"You have reason enough to do this," he said. "What reason can you offer me to risk killing the person I love most in this world?"

"I don't know," Elsdon replied quietly. "Perhaps you'll find that reason."

CHAPTER THREE

Elsdon smiled in his sleep. He had pushed down his blankets a while back; his chest and arms could be seen, golden in the lamplight. The fire from the lamp picked out the sun-bright fire in his hair, making it burn in the dark bedroom. He looked like the goddess Mercy, on one of the days when she disguised herself as a boy.

Hell sat beside Mercy. Layle stared down at Elsdon, held back from destroying his love-mate for the same reason the god had failed to destroy his sister: out of love for the young man sleeping next to him.

Not so young any more, Layle reflected, carefully watching each rise and fall of his love-mate's chest for signs of any break in Elsdon's peace. Five years had passed since the first time they had done this; Elsdon was now fully a man, in both body and power. In those five years, Elsdon had held true to him through all the trials that the High Seeker had sent him: Layle's confession of the truth about his past, his entrance into madness not once but twice, his slow healing from that madness.

And in all that time, Layle's love for Elsdon had not waned. Every time it threatened to – every time the High Seeker began to take for granted the man whose life he shared – Elsdon would notice, and on the day he noticed, Elsdon would demand this sacred ceremony of him. That was what it felt like to Layle – as though he were offering up Elsdon as a sacrifice to the gods each time. Each time, for five years, the gods had declined his gift. And each time, he and Elsdon had emerged from the sacrifice reborn: Elsdon renewed in his dedication as a Seeker, Layle renewed in his love for Elsdon.

The junior Seeker murmured something in his sleep. Layle leaned forward, frowning, but Elsdon's smile had not disappeared. Whatever it was he was feeling in his sleep, it gave him as much pleasure as their ceremony had. Reassured, Layle leaned back, resisting the impulse to stretch. He had been in this same position for seven hours now, and would not shift from it until Elsdon was awake again.

Elsdon did not like that. Each time, he wanted Layle to sleep beside him afterwards, or at least for them to stay awake together. But Elsdon was always drowsy after they were through, and Layle had been firm on this

point. It was, he had pointed out, fair exchange for the fact that Elsdon always required that Layle reach his zenith when they did this, though Layle would have preferred to have placed all his concentration on keeping Elsdon safe. If Elsdon required Layle's pleasure for his own to be complete, Layle had said sternly, then at least he could allow Layle the peace of mind to see this ceremony through to its end.

Elsdon, being a Seeker, knew why Layle needed this; he had permitted Layle his way in this matter. Tonight there was no sign that the ritual was anything more than formality, but he could not take the chance that he was wrong.

A soft rap on the door leading to the inner dungeon caused him to frown again. This was his night off; it was also Elsdon's night off. The dungeon inhabitants, who were dimly aware that he and Elsdon played out unusual acts in their bedroom, were always careful not to disturb the two Seekers when their nights off coincided together. Nobody much liked the thought of walking in on the High Seeker while he was acting out one of his dreamings.

He took a swift look at Elsdon, but his love-mate was so deep into his honey-rich dreams that he had not heard the knock. Slowly Layle rose from the bed, taking care not to jar Elsdon from his rest. Pulling down the face-cloth of his hood, he walked into the next room, leaving the bedroom door open wide enough that he could still see Elsdon if anything should change there.

His visitor turned out to be Mr. Sobel, a guard wise enough to keep his gaze focussed entirely on the High Seeker when the door opened. "Forgive me, sir," he said softly, "but I bear a message from the Queen, by way of the Codifier. Her spies from Vovim have just brought back a rumor concerning the High Master of the Hidden Dungeon; she believes it important that you know of this rumor. The Codifier asks that you meet with him, at your convenience."

"Is the matter urgent?" Layle asked, though he already knew the answer. "At your convenience" was the Codifier's way of saying that he would not claw the other person into fragments if the recipient of his message was delayed in arriving.

"He did not say it was, High Seeker."

Layle nodded. "Offer my apologies to the Codifier and say that, if the matter is not urgent, I will come to see him tomorrow. If the matter is urgent, I'm afraid he will have to come here to deliver the message. I am on a death watch."

Mr. Sobel was undoubtedly the best-trained guard in the dungeon; yet even so, his eyes flicked toward the bedroom and away quickly. "I'll deliver the message, sir. Do you have any need for assistance here?"

"No," replied Layle. And then, because his relations with his senior night guard had grown closer during the past year, he added what he would have said to no other man: "The danger is not great. I am being precautionary, that is all."

Clearly relieved at the High Seeker's news, Mr. Sobel departed, shutting the door as he went. Layle lifted the face-cloth of his hood and returned to where he had been before, sitting beside his sleeping love-mate. He spent a minute counting Elsdon's breaths, to be sure they had not grown more rapid than before. He had learned this task long ago, when he was first trained as a young Seeker to care for his prisoners.

Death watch. That was what it was called when a Seeker remained beside the bed of a prisoner who had just been racked. At a low level, there was almost no risk that the rack would bring permanent damage or death to a prisoner, but when the rack was used at a high level, the danger existed. And death, when it came, did not always come while the prisoner lay on the rack. Inward injuries could be slow in making their effects known. If a newly racked prisoner survived the first twenty-four hours without sign of pain, Seekers had discovered through experience, he was unlikely to die.

It had become the custom, as generations passed, for Seekers to spend those first twenty-four hours on a death watch over their prisoners. If the prisoner began to die, there was little a Seeker could do; the healing arts had not yet advanced far enough to be able to mend most inward injuries. But a Seeker could at least be there, to witness the consequences of what he had done, and to offer the prisoner what comfort and companionship he could, in the prisoner's final moments.

Elsdon's breath was steady. There was still no sign that the High Seeker had injured him inside, though Layle would not be able to relax until the twenty-four hours were past. He looked again at the fine curves of Elsdon's face, as a Seeker looks at the face of a prisoner who may be lost to him in a short while.

"I will never take you for granted," he whispered to his sleeping love-mate. "I will never turn you from my door. And if the worst should happen and you should leave me, I will never cease to love you."

He bent forward to kiss Elsdon.

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. . . Many torturers in his time struggled with similar problems, and many must have questioned whether the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking* had offered them the right solution.

In most nations, the process by which torture first began to be questioned as a reasonable act has been hidden to history. In our nation, however, we know the exact year in which the ethics of torture began to be questioned, and we know the names of the men who led the subsequent battle against all that the *Code of Seeking* had stood for during its first century and a half.

We also know who their primary opponent was in this battle. What followed next has been described by one historian as "a tragedy of ironies." But unlike most tragedies, this battle would be filled with surprises.

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

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Hell hath a co-operation with Heaven.

—St. John Chrysostom, as loosely translated by John Donne.

On Guard
PROLOGUE

The junior Seeker stood in the entrance, awaiting death.

He did not turn his head to look at the guard moving behind him. Instead, his eyes and thoughts remained focussed on the chamber around him. Unlike most other parts of the Eternal Dungeon, this chamber had no artificial walls. Instead, the chamber was a vast, semi-circular cavern, with niches carved into the walls to serve as shelves for glass-enclosed candles. Many of the candles were lit; their smoke created a haze in the upper part of the chamber, drifting slowly up to a smoke-hole at the very top of the ceiling.

The ground below was littered with ladders and extra candles and matches; otherwise it was stark. The floor consisted of nothing but the rough, uneven stone of the cavern, gleaming faintly in the light. In the middle of the chamber, a low railing guarded a circular area larger than a prisoner's cell. This area was made of stone as well, but the stone was manmade, as could be seen from the fact that it rose up in the middle to form a hook. From this hook rose a chain as vast in width as the chain that holds a steamer's anchor.

In the brightly lit chamber, only one other person stood: a woman from the outer dungeon, lighting a candle in honor of some Seeker or former prisoner she had known. The guard, stepping past the junior Seeker without a word, went over to the woman and said something to her in a whisper. She jerked and looked over her shoulder, staring with wide eyes at the hooded Seeker by the doors, as if she had seen a ghost. Then she nodded and hurried toward the only other exit from the chamber, a small door to the right of the junior Seeker.

Once she was through this, the guard closed and bolted the smaller exit before returning to the Seeker. Still silent, he stepped past. In a minute, the junior Seeker heard the great, booming sound of the crematorium's doors shutting behind him.

Only then did he move. He went over to one side of the chamber, used a key to open a metal panel set within the wall, and contemplated the switch there. With a wrench, he pulled up the switch.

A screech filled the chamber, like the grieving howl of a soul trapped in afterdeath. He covered his ears as the slack chain above the circular stone tightened, and then began rising. The screech of the metal was accompanied by a low, harsh rumble as stone scraped against stone.

He looked up at where the chain travelled over a pulley hanging from the ceiling, as it had for a century. The chain, though frequently replaced, was old in design; the machinery pulling the chain onto a vast wheel nearby had stood there for only twenty years. It was said to be the most powerful mechanical crane in the world, far more powerful than the cranes that had been used to build the mighty train-bridges that awed foreign visitors to the queendom of Yclau. Watching the rise of the stone lid, as heavy as any train, the junior Seeker did not doubt the boast about the crane. He only wondered how, by all that was sacred, the Seekers had managed to raise the lid before the existence of mechanical engines.

The lid stopped and hung, swaying, barely high enough for a man to crouch under it. This the junior Seeker did, feeling, as he always did, the breathless fear of an ant who has deliberately walked under a man's boot. He grabbed a nearby safety lamp as he ducked down, swinging it forward so that he could locate the top landing of the stairs spiralling round the pit below the lid. The light also landed on the circular wall of the ash-pit that the spiral staircase curved around. The ashes themselves were hidden from view.

He felt a little better once he was on the iron stairs, climbing his way down. The stairs, though of open ironwork, were steady under the feet and had strong handrails on both sides. There was little chance he would slip and fall, provided that he kept the lamplight spilling upon the steps to come. The stairs wound their way gradually round the pit, with manmade

stones on both sides, so it was easy to pretend that he was going down a circular stairway in the palace above the Eternal Dungeon, rather than circling in a spiral around a pit of death-ashes.

He could no longer hear the crackle of candle-flames above him, but he could hear the hiss of air, and occasionally the air would brush him when he passed a vent. The sound was reassuring. He had heard tales that, when the mechanical Lungs that kept the Eternal Dungeon alive had broken down, back in '42, the only person who failed to escape alive had been a Seeker who was in this pit at the time, mourning the death of a parent. Forgotten in the mad rush to evacuate the dungeon, he was found later at the top of the iron stairs, his hands pressed futilely against the stone lid that would open from below for no man, no matter how strong.

The junior Seeker looked back up the stairway. He could see dim light above, a sure sign that the lid remained raised. He told himself that the doors to the crematorium were now locked and guarded; he told himself that, even if by some chance a Seeker entered the crematorium and closed the lid, not knowing he was there, he could still survive here for weeks, and his absence would be noticed long before that. It made no difference. This place felt to him as it had on his previous visits, as though it were his grave.

As of course it was, he reminded himself. He looked at the convex wall next to him, wondering whether he had yet reached the level of the pit where, one day, his own ashes would rest.

He took a deep breath and continued down.

The only sound was his boots tapping the steps, and the thump of his rapid heartbeat. It was difficult, at times like this, not to think of the ashes that lay in the pit because of him. He could tell himself that his former prisoners' souls had been reborn into new life, but the only certainty he held was that the ashes of their bodies lay in the cold earth. Despite the autumnal coolness of the air, he paused a minute to raise the face-cloth of his hood, knowing that no one could see him here. Sweat lay thick on his face.

He walked more carefully after that, his palms now slick upon the railing. He felt sure that he must be nearing the end of his journey, and he knew

that certainty to be an illusion. The pit was wide and deep, made to hold ashes for many centuries in the future. Travelling down to its bottom took as much time as walking across the whole of the capital's Parkside district.

He could feel himself shaking by the end. He was strong, for a man of his class; he did not spend his days idling in a parlor chair but instead stood for anywhere up to twelve hours a day, searching prisoners. But walking down an endless staircase, holding a lamp in the dark and trying not to stumble to one's death, was an exercise that would exhaust even the strongest man. He tried not to think of what the journey upward would be like.

The door came so suddenly that he nearly walked into it. He stood a moment, trying to catch his labored breath, and feeling his heart drum inside him. He did not bother to look up; he knew he was too far down to see any light now. After a minute, he hung his lamp on the hook designed for it, next to another lamp that was dark. He closed the shutter of his own lamp, more out of respect for where he went than out of fear that some unknown gas would set the stairwell ablaze. He could still hear the ventilated air sighing, like a mother soothing her frightened child. He groped a moment in the dark, found the latch, and opened the door as quietly as he could.

He was just as quiet closing it. The small cubicle he stood in was nearly pitch-black; he paused a moment before soundlessly pushing back the curtain in front of him. Then, as he heard the unmistakable hiss of another ventilation shaft, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the light in the chamber of death.

"The vigil chamber" was its official title, but the junior Seeker had never heard this room called that except in documents. It was as stark in design as the crematorium: nothing more than a circular floor that was the width of the pit, with a stone wall curving round the sides. Its ceiling had begun, in the past two years, to bow under the accumulated weight of a century's worth of death-ashes. The junior Seeker did not like to think of what the scene in this room would be like if the ceiling gave way while he was there. He knew that the palace engineers were still battling each other over the best way to preserve this place. In the meantime, the High Seeker had broken with decades' worth of tradition and ordered that a small electric

light be installed above the only exit, in case there should be enough warning of an impending cave-in to give the vigil-keeper time to dash for the stairwell. No longer would vigil-keepers be plunged into the dark once the oil in their lamps gave out, permitting them to share in the lonely darkness experienced by the newly dead. For now, the vigil-keepers' prayers would take place in dim light.

The junior Seeker could not see that the light made any difference to the atmosphere of the chamber. This place still looked like what it was: an ancient burial tomb.

As his pupils widened, his vision took in what lay in the chamber: Crates of tinned food and tinned milk, enough to supply this place for a month. Other supplies necessary for a long sojourn. An inconspicuous metal plate in the ground that the junior Seeker knew led to a waste pit that would be cleaned out later by dungeon workers. A bed that looked as though it had not been slept in. A chair that had clearly not been sat in, for it was holding one of the crates. And in the midst of this all, kneeling on the stone floor in the center of the chamber with his body upright but for his bowed head, was the High Seeker.

His head was bare of his hood; his back was to the junior Seeker. He said without turning, "I was told I could have a month."

The junior Seeker stepped out of the darkness of the tiny antechamber. "Another message arrived from Vovim. The Codifier needs to speak with you."

The High Seeker did not move for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he made a gesture that was foreign to the junior Seeker but elaborate enough that it appeared to convey meaning to something unseen. The High Seeker rose slowly to his feet but continued to look down, as though his thoughts were not on the ashes above, but on something that lay much further below.

After a minute, he moved over to one of the crates, picked up an incising instrument that lay atop it, and stared at the wall that surrounded him. The junior Seeker, sensing what he was searching for, went over to one curve of the wall and pointed to his own initials, carefully incised into the stone. The carving was surrounded by hundreds of other initials, some

overlapping each other as the Seekers who had visited this place vied for elbow room in the remaining space on the wall.

The High Seeker nodded and began incising his initials next to the junior Seeker's. The junior Seeker watched him work without speaking. He had carved his own initials here three years before, when he had come here to honor the delayed interment of his sister's ashes. He had been here twice since then, once to mourn the death of his father, and a second time when he learned of the death of the schoolmaster who had taught him his letters. The High Seeker, though, had apparently never entered this chamber in vigil before, not even after the death of the man who had first trained him to be a Seeker.

Behind him, the junior Seeker heard a faint, irregular beeping, like the peep of a newborn chick. He looked round the dim chamber until he found what he was searching for: a niche in the wall, holding a pair of headphones and a signalling instrument.

Leaving the High Seeker at his work, the junior Seeker went over and put on the headphones. The code, as he had suspected, was from the Codifier's night secretary, signalling the vigil-keeper in the required daily pattern. The junior Seeker waited for a pause, and then acknowledged the signal with his own name and the High Seeker's, tapping in the code with the painstaking care of someone who has learned his code in school rather than at work. He added the information that he and the High Seeker would be returning to the dungeon.

The acknowledgment from the Codifier's office came immediately; the acknowledgment from the palace above the dungeon took longer. The junior Seeker was not surprised. The signalling office of the Yclau palace was the largest in the world, hooked by cable to dozens of governments and receiving hundreds of messages each hour. Most of these messages required no more than a token acknowledgment, so the palace signalling office had developed machines to punch the code onto paper that could be read and transcribed at a later date.

Out of all the signalling instruments in that room, the junior Seeker had been told, only one had a bell attached to it to alert the code-men that a

new message had arrived. Even so, three minutes passed before a code-man responded.

The junior Seeker used that time to marvel at the marriage of old and new that was represented by this signalling instrument in the ancient vigil chamber. He knew that the High Seeker had received strong opposition from the other senior Seekers when he had proposed this addition several years before. They had argued that a true vigil required that the vigil-keeper share the conditions of the dead.

The High Seeker had not tried to argue with his colleagues; that was not his way. Instead, he had placed before them a list of the names of the vigil-keepers who had died from illness of body or mind in the death chamber over the past century, because the chamber lacked any direct means of communication with the world above. Then, equally silently, he had laid before them the passage in the *Code of Seeking* which required that Seekers preserve life wherever possible.

The signal from the palace arrived, a terse acknowledgment followed by a reminder that the palace would require word from the Codifier's office once the vigil-keeper and his companion were returned to the Eternal Dungeon. Both the junior Seeker and the Codifier's secretary acknowledged the message; then the junior Seeker pulled off the headphones and turned to look at the High Seeker.

The High Seeker had by now stepped back to gaze at the initials and year he had incised, which were hidden in the shadow of his body. The junior Seeker wondered whether he was seeing instead the initials of the man for whom he had come here.

The junior Seeker said, "He is reborn. You can be sure of that."

"Can I?" The High Seeker often pronounced questions like this in the presence of prisoners. When he did so, it was with a light voice, mildly inquisitive, no matter how deep his actual interest in the prisoner's answer. Now his voice sounded as though it were dipped in dark liquid. "He was Vovimian, believing that he would spend eternity at hell. Perhaps that makes a difference."

The junior Seeker stepped forward then, touching the High Seeker lightly on his sleeve. "Love, he abused prisoners," he reminded the High Seeker solemnly. "If he is undergoing pain now, it is no worse than the pain he often gave others."

The High Seeker did not look his way. "The last words he wrote were of his apprehension that I would despise him if I learned that he was afraid when he was brought to his final moments. Despise!" The High Seeker's voice was halfway between a laugh and a sob. "He tried to reform his dungeon, knowing what fate awaited him if his efforts were discovered, and yet he believed I would think less of him because he feared that ending when it came!" He turned away abruptly, went over to the bed, and picked up the hood that lay on the pillow there.

He did not put it on immediately, though. He remained where he was, staring at the ground in the cool room, saying softly, "And it was all for nothing. All the work he did, all the pain he endured at the end – it was wasted. His dungeon is returned to what it was; his blood was spent for nothing."

"Then see that his death was worth it."

The High Seeker raised his head slowly to look at the junior Seeker. Though his face remained naked, his expression was unreadable. The junior Seeker gave an impatient shrug of his shoulders. "Love, you've told me often enough that, if a prisoner dies before he has accomplished what he should in his life, it is up to those who were close to him to bring to fruit the deeds that remain to be done. He wouldn't want you to give way to despair like this. If he sent you his last thoughts, it was because he hoped that you could make something of his death."

The High Seeker was very still. His eyes were opaque. Then, without any expression entering his face, he pulled his hood over his head.

"Yes," he said softly as he walked forward. "I will make something of his death. I swear that, by the name of hell's High Master."

The junior Seeker felt uneasiness enter him then. He opened his mouth to speak, but the High Seeker walked past him without pause, flicking a switch in the wall as he did so. The chamber plunged into darkness.

***On Guard* 1**
PROMOTION

Barrett Boyd
The year 360, the sixth month.

In our day, the crime that the first High Seeker of the Eternal Dungeon has often been charged with is of having been a vicious, cruel abuser of prisoners, torturing men and women without reason and using his power to force others to horribly maltreat prisoners. In light of these charges, Layle Smith's justifications for the actions he began taking in his fortieth year make no sense.

To understand those events, we must remember that, even in our own day, an opposing charge has been placed against Layle Smith. Citizens of victim rights organizations complain that Layle Smith was the first in a long line of prison workers who cared more about the welfare of their prisoners than about their prisoners' victims and possible future victims. These critics argue that the first High Seeker's policy of urging in court that his prisoners receive lower sentences established a terrible trend that has continued into our own crime-filled era.

In the Golden Age of the Eternal Dungeon, such voices must have been, not a minority, but an overwhelming chorus. Few people would have argued that Layle Smith was too hard on his prisoners. Instead, from the time that Layle Smith first began reforming the Eternal Dungeon's overly punitive handling of prisoners, he must have been told again and again that he was being far too soft on criminals who deserved nothing less than prolonged torture and death.

Anyone who claims that Layle Smith should have remained on a pedestal, far above these criticisms, must ask themselves whether they would have had the ability to remain deaf to such a united chorus. What is surprising is not that Layle Smith began to listen to the charges. What is surprising is that he waited until the moment at which, for the first time, a second charge was placed against him. At that point, buffeted by blows in

opposite directions, he chose to stand his ground firmly in the middle. Too firmly, as history would later judge . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ONE

"Most people would consider it a demotion," said Barrett Boyd. "To go from being senior day guard to the second-highest ranked Seeker in the dungeon to serving a junior Seeker . . ."

"Anyone who has seen Mr. Chapman and Mr. Taylor at work would understand," replied Mr. Sobel in a quiet voice, his gaze slowly grazing the posted guards as he passed them. "Mr. Chapman well deserves his rank, but he breaks his prisoners through the same, time-honored methods each time. He doesn't experiment with new techniques. Mr. Taylor, on the other hand—"

"That's exactly right!" Barrett interrupted. "Elsdon Taylor is fresh, new. He uses bold methods to break his prisoners; he isn't afraid to try techniques that haven't been tried before."

Mr. Sobel nodded without looking Barrett's way. "Mr. Smith is like that as well. He nearly gave heart attacks to the senior members of this dungeon during his first six months here. He was pressing the boundaries of the Code so hard that everyone was convinced he would not be permitted to take his oath as a torturer."

"And instead he became High Seeker." Barrett was not disturbed by the fact that Mr. Sobel continued to keep his face turned away from his fellow guard. Barrett was off-duty; Mr. Sobel was on-duty, and the greater part of his attention must be focussed on supervising the other guards of this dungeon, checking that they were properly watching the prisoners in their cells. It was a measure of the trust between Mr. Sobel and Barrett that the High Seeker's senior night guard would converse with him in a casual manner while on duty. Some guards, Barrett thought sourly, would be all too likely to take advantage of Mr. Sobel's familiarity.

Mr. Sobel nodded, his eyes narrowing as he sighted something he did not like. "He has continued to experiment, though. After twenty-two years, he is as inclined as ever to press the boundaries of the Code. . . . Mr. Crofford."

"Sir?" squeaked the young guard standing by the door of a prisoner's cell, clearly alarmed at being singled out for reproof.

"Am I right in surmising you are left-handed?"

A look of bewilderment appeared on the young guard's face. "Yes, sir."

"Then you may carry your dagger at your left hip rather than your right, if you wish."

Mr. Crofford's expression grew yet more bewildered in the dim lamplight of the dungeon corridor. "But sir, the Code says . . ."

"The intention of the Code is to place the dagger at closest hand, in case an emergency should arise. For right-handed guards, that means at their right hand. The High Seeker has always permitted guards who are left-handed to wear their daggers at the left."

"Oh!" Mr. Crofford tugged at the sheath on his belt. Although his speech had been fumbling, his movements were not, Barrett noted with pride. He had trained Mr. Crofford himself, and as he passed on, his eyes linked with Mr. Crofford's in a wordless acknowledgment of their tie.

Mr. Sobel was saying, "It's a good choice, but Mr. Urman will be angry when he hears that Mr. Taylor has picked you. He was hoping for that position himself."

Barrett snorted. "He had his chance to be a senior guard for Mr. Chapman last year, and he wrecked it," he said – perhaps a bit unkindly, he admitted to himself. Mr. Urman had paid the price for his carelessness in handling one of Mr. Chapman's prisoners. "Besides, can you see him working under Mr. Taylor? He's been at Elsdon Taylor's throat since the day Mr. Taylor arrived here."

"Understandable," said Mr. Sobel. "Has Mr. Urman told you about the beating?"

"Whose, Mr. Taylor's? I know he was beaten when he was the High Seeker's prisoner, if that's what you're asking."

"The beating was in error." Mr. Sobel lowered his voice yet further, though they were beyond the other guards now, entering the lampless stretch of corridor past the rack rooms. "But that's Mr. Urman's tale, if he has not

already told it." He frowned. "What's going on here?" He strode forward, with Barrett at his heels.

Mr. Urman was a competent guard, Barrett had to admit as they came out of the darkness into the lamplight next to the crematorium doors. Even before they emerged, Mr. Urman had his dagger out and his other hand on his whip. The junior guard relaxed as he saw the two senior guards come forward.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Urman?" Mr. Sobel's voice was perhaps too sharp, but given Mr. Urman's history, that was hardly surprising.

The junior guard shrugged as he sheathed his dagger. "How should I know? I was under the impression that the night shift was my time for sleep. But it appears I was mistaken about that. The almighty wise one – namely, Taylor – grabbed me and posted me here several hours ago."

"Mr. Urman, you will refer to him as Mr. Taylor," said Mr. Sobel, his voice edged like a blade, as Barrett cast a sympathetic glance at him. He had always been glad that Mr. Sobel, not himself, was senior-most guard in the dungeon and therefore was burdened with the uncomfortable task of having to reprove the speech of his fellow guards.

Mr. Urman shrugged again. "The High Seeker's love-mate put me here. Is that identification enough?"

Mr. Sobel chose to ignore this. He was staring beyond Mr. Urman at the crematorium doors, which, when opened, were just wide enough for a corpse and its attendants. "What does he want in there, I wonder?" the High Seeker's guard murmured.

"The almighty one? To play Torturer and Prisoner in the High Seeker's bed, I suppose." Mr. Urman's voice was acid.

Mr. Sobel's gaze switched to the junior guard. "Mr. Urman," he said in the matter-of-fact voice that made him so different from the High Seeker, "I do hope I will not have to ask you to visit me in the guardroom again."

The junior guard shifted uneasily. This gave Barrett the opening he needed. "What's this I hear about Mr. Taylor and a beating?" he asked.

Mr. Urman glared at Mr. Sobel. "I thought you were supposed to keep silent about disciplinary matters."

"We were discussing Mr. Taylor's beating," Mr. Sobel said mildly.

"*You* were beaten?" Barrett said to Mr. Urman. "Because of Mr. Taylor?" He was curious rather than surprised.

For a moment, Mr. Urman looked as though he would explode; then he shrugged. "That was a long time ago, when Mr. Taylor first arrived here as a prisoner. I made a mistake; I didn't tell the High Seeker something about Mr. Taylor's actions he should have known."

"So Mr. Taylor was beaten when he should not have been," prodded Mr. Sobel.

"That's what the High Seeker said afterwards, anyway." Mr. Urman's tone was sulky. "That was his excuse for ordering my beating." He shrugged again, as though trying to remove the memory of the lash from his shoulder-blades; then he glared at Barrett. "I was in training then. Don't tell me that you never received a beating when you were in training."

Barrett had enough sense not to speak aloud the truth, which was that he had received no beatings and few reprimands during his time as a guard-in-training. He also bit back the retort that Mr. Urman had received fifteen disciplinary beatings since becoming a fully-trained guard, tying the all-time record for disciplined guards in this dungeon. The beatings were not entirely Mr. Urman's fault. Boldness and innovation were encouraged in senior Seekers and senior guards; the same qualities were discouraged in junior Seekers and junior guards to a degree that Barrett found disturbing. He was not surprised that a guard like Mr. Urman, restless to try new methods, had endured Mr. Sobel's whip on so many occasions. He was only surprised that Mr. Taylor had not.

But since the High Seeker would have been the one to order Mr. Taylor's beating, perhaps that was not so surprising after all. Barrett toyed with this thought for a moment, trying to decide which image was odder in his mind: Mr. Smith ordering his love-mate's beating, or Mr. Smith not ordering his love-mate's beating.

Mr. Sobel apparently felt that the conversation had turned too grim. He said lightly, "Isn't the central Vovimian rite the marriage of Mercy and Hell? Perhaps the High Seeker needs Mr. Taylor to assist him with whatever religious rituals he is performing down there."

Mr. Urman's expression made Barrett snort again. He supposed that Mr. Urman had never been privileged before now to hear the High Seeker's senior night guard make a filthy joke. Barrett added, "We can guess which of them is playing Mercy."

"And who is Hell." Mr. Sobel gave the slight grimace of discomfort that he always showed on the few occasions when he poked fun at his Seeker.

Mr. Urman evidently decided it was safe to join the merriment. "And we can imagine what the rite is like too. Mr. Smith will go down on one knee before Mr. Taylor—"

"He'll pledge to him his undying love," said Barrett.

"He'll offer him flowers—"

"—and all the riches of his life and body—"

"—and then he'll tie up Mr. Taylor and use his instruments of torture on him," Mr. Sobel said wearily as the other two men crowed with laughter. "Yes, I know; we've all heard the jokes before."

"The trouble is," said Barrett, wiping away tears of amusement, "that those jokes are likely to be too close to the truth. I can't imagine why Mr. Taylor stays with the High Seeker."

"Let's just be thankful that he does," replied Mr. Sobel shortly. His head had turned toward the darkness behind them, and Barrett knew he was thinking that he should return to his patrol.

Mr. Urman, though he had not moved from his post during this conversation, allowed himself to lean back against the narrow crack between the crematorium doors. "What does it matter if those two stay at peace with one another?"

Mr. Sobel's head snapped back. He and Barrett exchanged looks.

"What?" asked Mr. Urman, frowning.

"Mr. Urman," Mr. Sobel replied in that patient voice Mr. Boyd remembered him using often during Mr. Urman's training, "have you noticed, by any chance, that Mr. Taylor is an extremely stubborn individual?"

Mr. Urman gave a short laugh. "Stubborn? I suppose that's the polite way of putting it. Bloody-minded is how I would have put it."

"And have you noticed," contributed Barrett, "that Mr. Smith is also a very stubborn man?"

Mr. Urman did not bother to reply this time.

"And has it occurred to you to wonder," finished Mr. Sobel softly, "what would happen to this dungeon if Mr. Taylor's stubbornness came into conflict with Mr. Smith's stubbornness?"

Mr. Urman opened his mouth, and left it hanging. There was a pause. The crematorium doors slid open.

Mr. Urman, who was still leaning against the crack, nearly fell flat onto his back. He was saved by Mr. Taylor, who managed to put Mr. Urman back on his feet with such swiftness that it appeared that Mr. Urman had not moved. A characteristic generosity, Barrett thought to himself, as he ran his eye over the junior Seeker.

Elsdon Taylor, lit by the lamp over the doorway and by candles in the chamber beyond, looked as though he were about to drop from exhaustion. Barrett could not blame him. By tradition, only the men and women who would one day be buried in this crematorium – mainly Seekers and former prisoners who lived in this dungeon – were permitted to use the death chamber. Barrett had once gone there, though, to assist a Seeker who was too elderly to make his way up the stairs without assistance. They had taken the journey in easy stages, with long pauses periodically, but even so, Barrett had been shaking as hard as the elderly Seeker by the end of the journey.

By contrast, the High Seeker looked as though he had spent the last few hours sitting behind his desk in his office. His gaze, half-hidden within his

hood's eye-holes, travelled over the three guards. Under normal circumstances, his gaze would have been cool, in a manner that always made Mr. Boyd's stomach churn, as though he had received the sudden, disastrous misfortune of becoming a prisoner to the High Seeker. But Mr. Smith's expression was different on this occasion: it seemed vague, as though he were not fully present.

Mr. Boyd had seen this expression before, in the eyes of other vigil-keepers emerging from their isolation. He often wondered what it was that vigil-keepers saw during their weeks of silence and darkness.

Mr. Urman, recovering his composure without so much as a glance of gratitude to Mr. Taylor, took something from his pocket and thrust it toward the High Seeker. "This arrived from the Codifier's office an hour ago, Mr. Smith. I was instructed to give it to you when you emerged. The messenger said that it's a separate matter from the news that Mr. Taylor conveyed to you."

The High Seeker took the folded note silently and used his teeth to cut through the string. Barrett had never wanted to ask how the High Seeker had learned to use his teeth like dagger-blades. As Mr. Smith read the note, Mr. Taylor gave a nod of greeting to Mr. Urman, a nod of greeting to Mr. Sobel, and a word of greeting to Barrett. Given that Mr. Sobel, not Barrett, was Mr. Taylor's close friend, Barrett felt the compliment as though it were warm tea entering his body on a winter's day.

"Mr. Sobel." The abruptness of the High Seeker's voice made everyone present jump, even Mr. Taylor, who must assuredly be accustomed to abruptness from his love-mate.

"Sir." Mr. Sobel, not surprisingly, was the quickest of the guards to recover.

"There will be an inner-dungeon meeting at tomorrow's dusk break. All active-duty Seekers and guards are to attend, other than the dusk-break guards, with whom I will speak later. See that word is spread."

Mr. Sobel murmured an acknowledgment that the High Seeker did not await; he had brushed past the guards and was swallowed up quickly by the darkness. He had not shown the note to Mr. Taylor, Barrett noted. Mr.

Taylor paused a moment in the doorway, and then hurried after the High Seeker.

"Well," said Mr. Urman, not quite long enough for the High Seeker to be out of earshot, "what do you suppose *that* was about?"

Barrett waited until the Seekers' footsteps had receded far enough for him to safely reply, "We'll find out soon enough, I suppose. Mr. Sobel, do you want me to spread word to the Seekers and guards on the day shift, when they come on duty?"

"Thank you, Mr. Boyd." Mr. Sobel did not look at him; he was still staring into the darkness, his brow creased.

Barrett asked hesitantly, "What is it?"

Mr. Sobel replied slowly, "His eyes."

"So? He has been in vigil for three weeks; they always look like that when they come up from the pit."

The High Seeker's senior night guard did not reply but continued to stare into the darkness. Nearby, Mr. Urman said cheerfully, "Bed at last. At least I'll be able to get a couple of hours' sleep before my shift."

Mr. Sobel turned round swiftly, as though the renewed acid in Mr. Urman's voice had awoken him. "I need your help in spreading word to the guards who are on their monthly leave. Some of them have left the dungeon; you'll have to go retrieve them from the lighted world."

"Oh, for love of— Honestly, Mr. Sobel, I think you must hate me. You could easily choose another guard to do that. . . ."

Barrett let them battle the matter out. He stepped into the dark stretch of corridor, his mind no longer on the High Seeker. Instead, his thoughts were on the junior Seeker, hurrying to catch up with the man who had not looked his way.

CHAPTER TWO

The guardroom, when Barrett entered it at the beginning of the dawn shift, was its usual self: crowded, chaotic, and full of comradeship. The jam at the main entrance was worse than usual, though; Barrett paused to see what was causing the clutter. The new object of interest, it turned out, was a time clock.

An older guard, close to retirement, examined the clock's dial and gleaming metal surface before snorting. "It'll last one month," he predicted. "Then it will rust."

Several of the other guards nodded. Everyone knew the effects of the dungeon's air on machinery; perpetual dampness was the reason that the Eternal Dungeon had resisted the introduction of most machinery since the Industrial Era began.

"No more water clocks to turn, though," said a guard who evidently hoped for a reduction in workload.

Mr. Crofford, having located his time card, with each hour and half hour carefully listed on the edge, tentatively inserted the card into the time clock, and then jumped in place as the clock emitted a heavy "chunk" sound. The guards around him gave half-smothered laughs that Mr. Crofford failed to notice. He was busy extracting and staring at his card, which now had a bite against the time: "3.30 AM."

"But how do I know whether my shift has ended?" the young guard asked, bewildered.

"Ask a bat," replied another guard, to chortles from the men around him.

"They forgot to give the bats their cards," said a third guard, which left the guards howling with laughter. Barrett, grinning, squeezed his way past the crowd, nodding to several guards in greeting as he passed.

The jam lessened as he reached the place where the entryway gave way to a narrow room. Not that there was much to look at here. With the notable exception of the washroom section, the guardroom was not a place where guards lingered, since the dungeon's common room and dining hall were

the preferred locations for leisure activities. The guardroom had the more utilitarian purpose of being a place for storage and notices and discipline.

Ignoring the thick pillar at the far end of the room, Barrett armed himself with dagger and whip from his locked cubbyhole at the armory – he had already uniformed himself in his living quarters – and then made his way toward the wooden notice-board, ignoring the horseplay taking place beyond the washroom doorway to his right. Mr. Yates, who had trained Barrett upon his arrival at the dungeon, and who was now senior guard to a day-shift Seeker, was spending the final minutes of his off-duty time perusing this week's city arrest report, which was attached to the notice-board. He smiled a greeting at Barrett and asked, "Have you seen the latest news?"

"What news is that?" replied Barrett, reaching toward a stack of blank paper that was left on the table near the notice-board for anyone who wished to make use of it. He did not bother to look up at the arrest report. He had never seen the point of reading it, since most of the men and women arrested in the city were sent to the lesser prisons for searching.

Mr. Yates, squinting in the flickering light of the old-fashioned oil lamp attached to the wall, said, "They've caught the man responsible for the case of the Earl of Hartgrove."

"The man *thought* responsible," Barrett replied automatically, screwing open the inkwell. A Vovimian-style paintbrush lay nearby, courtesy of the High Seeker, who had argued seven years before that the broad strokes of the brush were more appropriate for notices that might be seen from afar. Some guards had made mock at the time about Mr. Smith trying to turn the Eternal Dungeon into the Hidden Dungeon. Nobody had made mock about this in his presence, or in any tone above a whisper.

Mr. Yates grinned at him. "You've turned the mentor. You're right, of course – 'thought responsible.' He'll be showing up here, no doubt, so we'll have the chance to find out for ourselves whether he's innocent."

Barrett leaned over the table as he wrote out a notice that told of the dusk-shift meeting. "It's not a capital crime. They'll send him to one of the lesser prisons."

"For a case involving an earl? He'll end up here for sure."

Barrett shook his head as he blew the paint dry, and then reached for the hammer and nails. "Hold this for me?" he requested.

Mr. Yates obligingly held the notice in place as Barrett hammered it onto the board. "You're stubborn. I say that he'll turn up here."

"And I say that he won't," Barrett mumbled around the wooden nails in his mouth. He paused to give Mr. Yates a challenging look.

Mr. Yates smiled, glanced to the side, and leaned in, his hand already fingering the inner jacket pocket where his bill-clasp lay. "Want to wager a day's pay on that?" he asked in an undertone.

Barrett was about to ask whose level of pay they were wagering – he had seniority in rank over Mr. Yates these days – but at that moment, Mr. Yates's face suddenly went blank. Pulling his hand hastily out of his jacket, the guard turned his attention back to the notice he was holding.

Barrett spit the remaining nails into his palm, and then turned to look at the man who had come up beside them. Thankfully, it was not the High Seeker, but it was bad enough.

"Mr. Boyd, may I have a word with you?" murmured Mr. Sobel.

"Yes, sir." Strict formality seemed best under the circumstances. "Mr. Yates, will you finish nailing the notice for me?"

Mr. Yates, whose expression had turned bleak, nodded as he took the hammer and nails from Mr. Boyd. Mr. Boyd stepped away, following Mr. Sobel to the clearest space in the room, which was next to the washroom. Mr. Sobel glanced through the open door, where the horseplay had proceeded to wet towels being snapped against bare bottoms; he carefully closed the door. One of Mr. Sobel's many merits, in the eyes of the other guards, was that he was willing to overlook certain high-spirited activities that took place in the washroom.

What had happened at the notice-board was clearly not an activity he was willing to overlook. The High Seeker's senior night guard flicked a glance at Mr. Yates, who was diligently hammering in nails. Over the sound of

continued laughter at the time clock, Mr. Sobel murmured, "Your fault, or his?"

"Mine," replied Barrett. "I encouraged him to make the offer. I'm sorry."

Mr. Sobel slipped from the left pocket of his jacket the small, familiar volume that every guard was required to carry when on duty. "Find me the appropriate passage, please."

Barrett did so with ease; the passage in the *Code of Seeking* that forbade gambling within the Eternal Dungeon was the one that guards were most likely to make mock at when having late-night drinking sessions in private. The mockery invariably led into a game of whist, played for stakes.

"Read the passage aloud, please." Mr. Sobel's voice remained quiet.

"'We take necessary risks with the lives of our prisoners, but we refuse to profit from our prisoners' sufferings and deaths. For that reason, no Seeker or guard may place wagers within the confines of the Eternal Dungeon, nor in the lighted world on any matter related to the dungeon.'" Barrett recited the passage in an automatic manner, seeing nothing there that he had not seen before.

Mr. Sobel took back the book, sliding it into his jacket. "A game of cards is one thing," he observed. "Gambling on whether a prisoner will be placed in a breaking cell here is quite another. Are you aware that the High Seeker added that rule to the Code after a guard sought to win his wager about a prisoner's endurance on the rack by trying to surreptitiously raise the racking level higher than he had been ordered?"

Barrett felt himself stiffen. "Mr. Sobel, you know that I would never do anything like that."

"No, but you might encourage the folly of less experienced guards. There was a case before your time – I will not name names – where a senior guard made light remarks about the fates of certain prisoners. These remarks were overhead by the junior guard serving under him, who, trusting that his senior's perspective was the correct one, made the quite reasonable assumption that guards, as much as Seekers, had the right to

determine the outcome of their prisoners' fates." Mr. Sobel paused as two guards emerged from the room behind them, laughing and reaching out to rumple each other's wet hair. Seeing Mr. Sobel and Barrett, they smiled but did not pause on their way to the uniform racks.

They were both naked, except for the wet towels clinging to their loins; it took some effort for Barrett to turn his attention back to what Mr. Sobel was saying.

Mr. Sobel continued, "Soon afterwards, this junior guard was assigned to a prisoner who, unbeknownst to him, was mentally unbalanced. The Seeker searching the prisoner made this assessment swiftly and arranged to have the prisoner examined by this dungeon's healer. The healer approved the prisoner's transfer to an asylum. All was well and good, except that this guard, being very junior indeed, was not told of the transfer or of the reason for it."

Barrett's attention was on Mr. Sobel now, despite the fact that the guards had dropped their towels in the act of donning the drawers they had left next to the uniform rack. He thought he knew what was coming; it was the sort of scare-tale told to every new guard. He was embarrassed to discover that Mr. Sobel believed he might require a reminder of this elementary lesson.

"One day," said Mr. Sobel, "the junior guard was left alone on duty while his senior guard was sent on an errand. Their Seeker had the night shift; nobody was around to care for the prisoner except for the junior guard. Hearing the prisoner weep inconsolably, the junior guard went to investigate. The prisoner, in his madness, wove a very convincing tale of terrible horrors he had endured in the rack room, and swore that the Seeker had promised to place him in an iron chair the following day, with the fire beneath stoked to the point of unendurable torment. No such chair has ever existed in this dungeon, of course, even in its primitive years, but the guard was inexperienced and gullible enough to believe the prisoner's mad fancy.

"So he helped the prisoner escape in the only way he knew how. When the senior guard returned, he found the prisoner dead in his cell, with the junior guard's dagger through his heart."

Barrett scratched his earlobe, tilting his head as he did so. "And the three boys who skated without permission on Farmer Jones's pond fell through the ice and drowned. I don't want to sound cynical, Mr. Sobel, but I've heard so many variations on this morality tale that I find it hard to believe. Every guard in this dungeon – nearly every man and woman in this queendom – knows that assisting a suicide is a capital crime."

"So did this junior guard," replied Mr. Sobel quietly. "As for fictional morality tales, I would be glad to show you my record of witness from the trial that led to this junior guard's hanging. I was the senior guard who had spoken lightly about our prisoners in the junior guard's presence, and I was the guard who discovered the prisoner's corpse."

Barrett closed his eyes. Through the darkness he could hear laughter from the guards at the time clock, now joined by the laughter of Mr. Crofford, attempting to imitate his elders' levity.

He opened his eyes finally to see that Mr. Sobel was watching him carefully. Barrett said, "Sir, why don't you just strip me to the waist and tie me to that pillar over there? Twenty lashes of your finest would be easier for me to endure than being shown what a fool I am."

Mr. Sobel gave a quirk of a smile. "You're far too talented a guard to need lashes. I take it that I won't have to worry about this in the future?"

"No, sir, and I apologize for worrying you about it today." Barrett kept his voice firm, though he was beginning to feel that he would need to splash cold water on himself afterwards, for his face was burning.

Mr. Sobel said, "You're going on leave at week's end?"

Barrett nodded cautiously. "Unless my leave has been cancelled, as it certainly deserves to be."

"No, that's not at all what I had in mind. What I wanted to suggest is that you come by my quarters before you leave. My wife can make up a fruit bouquet for you to give to your mother – I'm sure your mother would enjoy that, if I remember her tastes correctly."

It took a minute for Barrett to regain his speech. Then he said, with an attempt at lightness, "Rewarding a miscreant, Mr. Sobel? It's a good thing

that the High Seeker isn't around to witness this."

Mr. Sobel smiled then. "Mr. Smith has his own ways of encouraging good behavior, and some of those ways are very pleasant indeed." His gaze drifted past Barrett. "Excuse me. It looks to me as though someone is taking the opportunity to use the notice-board as a spot to add a rude graffito – something about time clocks mating with bats to produce a clock that will tell us when our shifts have ended. The sentiment I agree with; the placement of the sentiment I can't permit." He gave Barrett another, swift smile before moving forward to intercept the offender, who either had not seen or had not cared that the High Seeker's senior night guard was standing nearby.

Barrett, watching him go, shook his head. It was fortunate, he decided, that his ambitions had never run to working directly under the High Seeker. Mr. Sobel had one of the worst jobs in the dungeon, and Barrett was quite happy to leave such supervisory activities in the other guard's hands.

He turned away, and went over to the time clock to tell the guards there of Layle Smith's dusk-shift meeting.

CHAPTER THREE

The presence of Layle Smith in the Eternal Dungeon, Barrett thought as he squeezed his way past the junior guards at the front of the entry hall, caused everything in the dungeon to be run topsy-turvy.

It was not the first time he had held this thought, but he rarely had the opportunity to see his viewpoint incarnated in so visible a manner. In the royal army, Barrett knew, the announcement of important news took place in a precise fashion. The chief general informed his highest officers, who in turn informed the officers just below them, until, after a day or so, the news trickled down to the bottom ranks. This was how most of the world worked, as far as Barrett could tell.

But not in the Eternal Dungeon – not under Layle Smith's High Seekership. Here, important news was announced to everyone at once; nor would the highest ranked Seekers be placed closest to the High Seeker as he made his announcement. Instead, the junior-most members of the inner dungeon, the junior guards, would stand nearest the platform that was placed in the portion of the entry hall where the Record-keeper's desk usually stood. The High Seeker's theory, it was said, was that the junior guards should be in a location where they could easily ask questions, since they were the ones most likely to have questions. Standing behind them would be the senior guards, while behind the guards, sitting on chairs on tables so that they could easily watch the proceedings, were the junior Seekers. Last of all, standing far away on the steps that led out of the dungeon's caverns, were the senior Seekers. The senior Seekers rarely spoke during such meetings, but they, like the others, were welcome to ask the High Seeker whatever questions they had, as though the High Seeker were nothing more than a schoolmaster giving lessons, rather than the man whose word determined how the dungeon was run.

That ordering was the theory, at any rate, but Barrett was not surprised to notice a black-hooded man standing in the front row, alongside the junior guards. That was unfailingly Elsdon Taylor's position during such meetings; he always kept close to the High Seeker so that he could provide moral support to Mr. Smith in the minutes following any announcement that disgruntled the dungeon dwellers. Knowing Mr. Taylor's reputation for heterodoxy, Barrett had no doubt that Mr. Taylor followed up such public

support by shoving hot protests of his own at the High Seeker when they were in private. But whenever in public, Mr. Taylor was a solid foundation of support for the High Seeker.

Mr. Boyd reached the back of the crowd of senior guards, who were spread from one wall of the entry hall to another. The entry hall was the largest room in the inner dungeon, other than the crematorium, but with so many dungeon dwellers here today, Barrett found himself bumping into guards as he passed along the side of one of the tables, seeking a clear space. His head brushed against the foot of a junior Seeker who had his legs crossed as he sat in a chair on the table, and Barrett opened his mouth to apologize.

He swallowed his words as he looked up. Mr. Urman, holding a folded newspaper in one hand, sat slouched in the chair above, his collar unclasped and his shirt unknotted at the top, as though he were sitting in a beach chair rather than in a chair reserved for the junior Seekers. As Barrett watched, Mr. Urman, without raising his eyes from the newsprint, fished into his pocket, drew out a piece of chickory gum, and popped it into his mouth, blithely ignoring the curious stares of the junior Seekers on either side of him.

Mr. Boyd quickly looked round. It took him a moment to locate Mr. Sobel; the senior-most guard had positioned himself apart from the other dungeon dwellers, on an upswelling of the uneven cavern floor, which allowed him to easily survey everyone in the entry hall. That Mr. Sobel knew where Mr. Urman was seated, Barrett had no doubt. Barrett decided that Mr. Sobel was right to take no official notice of the fact that Mr. Urman had taken Mr. Taylor's vacated seat. The junior guard had black rings under his eyes; he had been awake now for thirty-six hours and would have to continue to stay awake until this meeting was through. He looked like dry tinder, just waiting for a spark.

Mr. Urman looked casually over his shoulder, as though watching children frolic in the waves. Barrett guessed he was trying to check whether Mr. Sobel had sighted him yet. Whatever the junior guard saw startled him so much that he slid quickly out of the chair and jumped down onto the floor beside Barrett.

A moment later, Barrett recognized what had caused Mr. Urman to move so quickly. Murmurs rose in the entry hall as a pathway opened among the tightly crowded senior guards to let through the new arrivals: a pair of the Queen's guards flanking an elderly man who had all the signs of being a magistrate.

Mr. Urman whistled lightly as the path closed again in the procession's wake. "This *must* be an important meeting if the Queen sends her representative."

Barrett decided that he too would ignore Mr. Urman's previous impertinence, even though the junior guard had slid himself onto the edge of the table in order to see better as the Queen's guards and the magistrate took up positions at the back of the platform. Instead, Barrett pointed and said, "Not just the Queen's representative either. Look."

At the left-hand side of the room, near the door leading to the corridor where the prisoners' cells lay, a man was emerging from an inconspicuous doorway: the Codifier, rarely seen outside his office except when a prisoner was reported to have been abused by a Seeker or guard, or else during the Codifier's periodic, unannounced, terrifying visits to the prisoners' cells, when he checked to see whether the Code was being adhered to.

"The Queen's magistrate. The Codifier. This meeting must be about the Code, then," Mr. Urman concluded. "Do you suppose the Queen has abolished the Code?"

Barrett gave him a sharp look. "Don't say that, even in mock."

Mr. Urman shrugged and returned to his newspaper. Barrett looked back at the Codifier. One of the Codifier's guards had brought forward a chair for the man whose power was so great that he, alone of all the dungeon dwellers, had the right to overrule the High Seeker's decisions. The Codifier shook his head and remained standing against the wall, turning to speak to the healer.

Barrett frowned. The healer's presence here was no surprise, since the healer worked under the Codifier and was entitled to attend such meetings.

But this was not their regular healer, who was taking a much-deserved holiday after nearly thirty years of working in the dungeon.

Barrett liked to think that he was a forward-looking man. He was one of the few guards who had welcomed the arrival of the first female Seeker. He had long believed that female prisoners, who were never tortured, should be searched by a woman.

But a lady healer was another thing entirely. Among the healer's many duties was that he or she must give medical approval before any prisoner was tortured. In cases of beatings, this approval was almost routinely granted, even before the Seeker first entered his prisoner's cell. But prisoners destined for rackings were more strenuously examined. Fully a quarter of the prisoners whom the Seekers wished to rack were not racked, due to the dungeon's healer denying permission on medical grounds.

Barrett suspected that the number of denials would rise to one hundred percent under the substitute healer. He could not imagine any woman having the strength to say, "You may place this man on an instrument of torture and stretch him until he cooperates." Barrett often wondered how he himself found the strength to be the one to turn the wheel.

Beside him, Mr. Urman cracked his gum as he turned a page. Barrett leaned back so that he could see what Mr. Urman was reading and learn what was taking place in the lighted world. One of the few advantages of living in the Eternal Dungeon, Barrett decided as he scanned the page, was that the dungeon received no delivery of newspapers. The news was as bad as always: charges against factory owners of abusive work conditions, illegal rallies by disgruntled workers, illegal strikes led by the new and surprisingly powerful Commoners' Guild, and an editor's note attributing the city's rising crime to the magistrates' softness with criminals.

"More hangings," murmured Mr. Urman, voicing Barrett's thought.

Barrett nodded. "That's what it will mean in the short run: more men and women will go to the gallows as the magistrates try to show to the world how fierce they are. It happens periodically."

Mr. Urman turned a page. "Maybe the magistrates will keep more death-sentence criminals off the streets. Rather than let murderers and rapists go

free, the way the Code urges."

Barrett frowned. "Are you questioning the Code's views on this? The Seekers provide a balance: the patrol soldiers who give witness against the prisoner try to obtain a heavy sentence for him, while the Seeker tries to prove his innocence or obtain a light sentence for him. The magistrate decides which argument is right. That is, when the magistrates aren't cowering in fear of the press."

Mr. Urman grinned at him. "Do you know the easiest way to get anyone riled in this dungeon, Mr. Boyd? Question our holy book. Nobody wants to admit that the *Code of Seeking* might have a few flaws in it."

Barrett strove to keep his voice level as he asked, "Do you wish to abolish the Code?"

Mr. Urman's gaze drifted back to the newspaper. "I've worked at one of the lesser prisons. I've seen the alternative."

It was a comment requiring no reply. Barrett leaned back again, scanning the foreign news columns, which were mainly filled with war-scare articles. Having served in an earlier outbreak of war against Vovim, Barrett felt a moment of relief that his job as dungeon guard shielded him from call-up orders . . . then a moment of guilt that someone else might die in his place.

Mr. Urman's breath travelled in with such suddenness that he apparently swallowed his gum. Barrett pounded the junior guard on the back as he coughed, but already Mr. Urman had slipped off the table. Within moments, he was pushing his way through the crowd.

Curious, Barrett followed him, and then hesitated when he saw Mr. Urman's destination. Barrett, of all people, knew that it was wrong to disturb a pair of senior and junior guards when they were in private conversation with one another. But he did not know whether this was a private conversation, he reminded himself as he started across the empty space leading to where Mr. Urman and Mr. Sobel stood.

The entry hall was loud with conversation now, but not so loud that Barrett failed to hear the rustling in the high darkness above. Dusk was nearing.

As he came close to the upswelling of ground where Mr. Sobel had placed himself, Barrett realized that this location provided a cunning view, not only of the floor, but also of the stairs where the senior Seekers stood. He could see his own Seeker, Mr. Chapman, deep in conversation with the oldest active-duty Seeker, Mr. Ferris. The chairs for the junior Seekers were all filled now except for the seat Mr. Urman had left and a second one, with a step-stool below it to provide easy climbing. Looking around for its owner, Barrett saw that Mistress Birdesmond, Mr. Chapman's wife, had stopped to talk with the substitute healer rather than join the other junior Seekers in their prominent perch. Mistress Birdesmond always had enough sense to keep herself out of the High Seeker's immediate gaze. It was said that the mere fact of a female Seeker's presence in the inner dungeon made Layle Smith come close to the breaking point. This was yet another rumor that Barrett had never wanted to ask the details about.

He was close enough now to hear Mr. Urman: ". . . said the border between Vovim and Yclau has been closed for the past month. So the package *couldn't* have come from Vovim, unless it was smuggled."

Mr. Sobel parted his lips to reply, but shut them again as he caught sight of Barrett. Barrett halted as though he had turned the corner and seen the High Seeker with a whip in his hand. "I'm sorry," he murmured and began to back away.

Mr. Urman, who had turned toward the new company with eagerness, looked crestfallen. Mr. Sobel hesitated, then glanced at his junior guard and beckoned Barrett forward.

Barrett came toward them slowly, his spirits falling. If Mr. Sobel was willing to indulge Mr. Urman in his favorite pastime – gossip – then it could only be because the senior guard anticipated problems after this meeting and wanted Mr. Urman kept sweet so that he would back any action Mr. Sobel took to calm the trouble. Mr. Urman, who at times did not have great depth when it came to deciphering the motives of others, simply looked pleased as Barrett arrived.

"What package?" Barrett asked, giving Mr. Urman the lead he needed.

Mr. Urman looked briefly at Mr. Sobel to confirm that he had permission to speak on the matter, and then said, "It arrived three weeks ago. I was

with Mr. Smith when it happened. We had just walked into his office to discuss my request to become Mr. Taylor's senior night guard, when Mr. Smith saw the package lying on his desk. It was wrapped in brown paper, with ropes binding it – not string. It didn't have anything written on it. Mr. Smith wouldn't touch it."

"That's how he managed to live so long in his cut-throat native land, no doubt," Mr. Sobel commented. His gaze had returned to the crowd on the floor and stairway. He was scanning it carefully, as though the men and women there were guards at their posts.

"Did you get the opportunity to see what was in the package?" Barrett asked.

Mr. Urman refused to cut the story short. "He walked out of his office and asked the Record-keeper where the package had come from. Mr. Aaron said that it had been delivered by one of the guards at the main gates. So the High Seeker strode up the steps—"

"With you tagging along," Barrett added with a grin.

Mr. Urman managed to keep his expression straight. "In case he needed any assistance in searching the guard. The guard who'd made the delivery said that a civilian man had delivered it to the gates. The guard didn't know who he was or how he had gotten as far as the dungeon gates. The man was wearing a cloak that hid his clothes, and he spoke in the Yclau tongue, but from his accent and color, the guard thought he must be Vovimian."

Barrett whistled lightly. "And the High Seeker didn't smote the guard on the spot for delivering a potential assassination package?"

"Not when he heard the rest of the tale. He asked the guard if the man had given his name, and the guard said no, the man had stated that he was delivering the package, not for himself, but for an old friend of Mr. Smith's. And the man said that the friend had asked Mr. Smith to give his greetings to Toler Forge."

Barrett looked enquiringly at Mr. Sobel. Mr. Sobel shook his head. "'Toler' is a Vovimian name. That's all I know."

"Did the High Seeker recognize the name?" Barrett asked Mr. Urman.

"I'd say he did. He went all still, the way he does when a prisoner has said something that provides the clue on how to break him. Then the High Seeker turned without a word and went down the stairs. Fast. I barely got there in time before he closed the office door."

"But of course you followed him in," said Barrett dryly.

Mr. Urman's face was innocent as he replied, "We hadn't finished discussing my request for a rise in rank. When he saw I was there, he snapped, 'Fetch Mr. Taylor.' So I did. Taylor – sorry, Mr. Taylor – wasn't far away. When we got back to the office, the High Seeker was struggling to break the ropes around the package. He looked up and said to Mr. Taylor, 'One of Millard's men brought this. Help me open it.'"

"And you stayed for that as well," Barrett said, his mouth twitching.

"I lent him my dagger," Mr. Urman replied blandly.

"And stayed by his side, in case he should have any troubles using the blade, him being unused to weapons?"

Mr. Sobel passed a hand over his mouth. Mr. Urman grinned openly. "He sliced through those ropes as though he were wielding a knife through butter. Then he pulled the brown paper off, and we could see that the package contained a book."

"What was the title?" Barrett asked curiously.

Mr. Urman shook his head. "The book was face down when he opened it. It wasn't a printed book, in any case – it was a daybook, and when Mr. Smith opened the book to the last page, I could see that the page was handwritten."

"And of course," said Barrett in a deadpan voice, "you read what was on the page, in case your knowledge of the book's contents could assist the High Seeker."

Mr. Urman grinned again. "No such luck. It was written in Vovimian; I can't translate that without a dictionary at hand. Anyway, the High Seeker didn't read more than a sentence or two before he slammed the book shut.

Then he just stared at the cover. He was breathing really heavy. So Mr. Taylor told me to leave, and I did."

Barrett thought that, if he had been in a room where the High Seeker was breathing heavily, he would have left quickly also. Mr. Urman added, "They stayed in there together for an hour."

"While you stayed outside, watching the door," Barrett supplied.

"I had documentwork to do in the entry hall." Mr. Urman had returned to his look of innocence. "When they finally came out, Mr. Smith went straight into the Codifier's office. That's when he got permission to take vigil in the crematorium. For a whole month, as though he were mourning a brother or a favorite schoolmaster."

Barrett's smile dissipated. His gaze moved and locked with Mr. Sobel's. They were silent a minute, as the rustling in the ceiling increased.

Finally Barrett asked, "*Could* it be a brother?"

"No," Mr. Sobel replied. "He has no surviving family. I know that much."

"Then do you think the rumors are true?"

"They could be. I don't know what his name is. I've never seen it printed in the newspapers."

"Am I privileged to know what you're talking about, or is this a private conference?" Mr. Urman asked tartly.

Barrett ignored him. "He couldn't have been much older."

"A few years older. There was some sort of connection, I'm not quite sure what. Perhaps the older boy taught the younger boy what he knew."

"Well," said Mr. Urman, his voice changing from bitterness to anger, "if you two are going to spend all evening gossiping, I'll just leave you and get back to my duties." He took a step away.

Mr. Sobel grabbed him. A moment later, Barrett realized why as a hush fell over the entry hall like a smothering blanket. He turned in time to see the High Seeker emerge from his office at the front of the entry hall, and

then climb the steps onto the platform. The High Seeker did not acknowledge the presence of the Queen's representative in any way, but simply turned toward the dungeon dwellers now awaiting his word with suspended breath.

He did not speak. Barrett tried to read what lay in his eyes, but the High Seeker was too far away. The silence lengthened. Then the rustling above the crowd, which had continued all this while, turned into low thunder. Barrett lifted his face and watched the bats stream down from the ceiling, as they did every evening at dusktime.

The black stream followed its usual course up the stairs, flying round the senior Seekers, who appeared undisturbed to have become rocks in a black river. Barrett felt the floor vibrate slightly as the outer gates above, which were beyond his sight, were opened to allow the bats passage – a symbolic move rather than a practical one, since the bars of the outer gates were wide enough for the small bats to pass through, unlike the solid wood of the rarely-closed inner gates. Then the black stream disappeared, and a boom rang through the entry hall as the outer gates were closed again.

The boom repeated itself. Barrett's breath caught, and he saw several of the junior guards twist round to look back toward the gates in puzzlement. A few bats that had been slower than the rest raced up the stairway, disappearing out of view. They reappeared a moment later and circled the entry hall in evident confusion.

Barrett switched his gaze quickly to the only entrance he could see, the door leading to the prisoners' cells. Except on the rare occasions when a prisoner broke out from his cell, this door was always kept unlocked, but he was not surprised to see one of the Codifier's guards barring the door. A noise further down the wall that Barrett stood against told him that the door leading to the outer dungeon was also being barred.

A number of the junior guards were now whispering to one another, evidently trying to ascertain the meaning of what was happening. The High Seeker ignored them. Instead he turned his hooded head unerringly in the direction of his senior night guard. "Mr. Sobel?"

"All are here who should be here, High Seeker," replied the guard in ritualistic fashion. It was then that Barrett realized that Mr. Sobel had

positioned himself at this location, not only to see that all were here who should be here, but also to see that none were here who should not be here.

The High Seeker nodded and turned his attention back to the remainder of the dungeon dwellers. "For those of you who were not here on the last occasion when the inner gates of the inner dungeon were closed," he said, "I shall explain that this is a locked meeting. Some of what I tell you today has not been publicly announced, and will not be for the foreseeable future. Until I give word otherwise, what I say to you today may not be spoken of to anyone outside the inner dungeon, including your wives, your love-mates, and the dwellers of the outer dungeon." He paused, and then added, "Speaking without permission about the contents of a locked meeting is considered a treasonable offense."

A groan of proper appreciation for this announcement arose from the junior guards. Barrett thought the noise sounded forced. He glanced at the Seekers, both sitting and standing, and saw the knowledgeable, grim stiffness of their stances. They were the only people in this place who had seen men and women hanged; they alone fully comprehended the High Seeker's threat.

The High Seeker waited until his audience was settled again. In his black hood, black shirt, and black trousers, he was hard to see against the tall black slate-tablet behind him, containing the names of the current prisoners in the dungeon or those who had recently departed this place. As always, Barrett found himself sliding his gaze away from the tablet, so as to avoid sight of the names that had been crossed out.

In a voice pitched to carry up to the gates, the High Seeker said, "Some of you will have heard rumors that the High Master of the Hidden Dungeon has been executed."

Barrett and Mr. Sobel exchanged glances. All round the entry hall, other inner dungeon dwellers were doing the same, some giving shrugs of indifference at this topic. Mr. Urman sighed heavily and opened his newspaper again. Mr. Sobel swiftly moved in front of him to shield the High Seeker's gaze from the junior guard.

The High Seeker appeared to take no notice of the restlessness of his crowd. He continued, "We received official confirmation yesterday

afternoon that the rumors are true. The High Master was killed four months ago. He received a royal execution."

Several of the men present screwed up their faces at this news. Barrett began to turn to Mr. Sobel for enlightenment, and then decided that he really did not wish to know what a Vovimian royal execution consisted of.

The High Seeker's head had been turning from side to side, scanning the crowd. Suddenly he froze in place, like a wild-cat about to pounce. "Mr. Crofford," he said, "do you have a question?"

Barrett could see Mr. Crofford at the right edge of the group of junior guards. The young guard had been leaning over to whisper to a neighbor. Now he went as pale as though the High Seeker had suddenly produced a dagger in his hand. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice wavering. "I was wondering why this information was important. Doesn't the King of Vovim kill the head torturer of his dungeon every few years, in order to keep complete control over that dungeon? Besides, the Vovimians are our enemies."

Barrett looked quickly over at Mr. Sobel, but the High Seeker's guard did not look his way this time. His gaze was fixed upon Layle Smith, waiting for him to reply.

The High Seeker's voice was quieter than before when he responded. "It matters, Mr. Crofford, because, for the past year, the Hidden Dungeon has been unofficially operated under a code of conduct that bears a certain family resemblance to the *Code of Seeking*."

Mr. Urman dropped his newspaper. The sound of it falling was lost in the rising voices that echoed in the entry hall, which caused the remaining handful of bats to flutter nervously from perch to perch. There was not a Seeker or guard present who did not know the bloody history of the Hidden Dungeon and of Yclau's efforts to convince Vovim's King to reform his dungeon.

"'Unofficially,' did you say, Mr. Smith?" called out a junior guard, too eager to await recognition.

"Unofficially," confirmed the High Seeker, his voice causing the audience to quiet. "The late High Master acted on his own initiative, as Vovimian law permits. Unlike myself, the head torturer of Vovim's dungeon is not required to consult with anyone before making changes to his dungeon, not even the King. Although," he added dryly, "it is usually considered politic to ask the King's permission." With his head still turned toward the guard who had asked the question, he said, "Mr. Urman, your interest in this meeting is renewed by this news, I believe."

Mr. Urman uttered a soft curse, and then stepped out from behind Mr. Sobel. "Yes, Mr. Smith. I'm wondering whether the reason the High Master was killed was because he had instituted a code of conduct similar to the *Code of Seeking* that the King has opposed for so long."

"I think we can assume that played a role in the King's decision to execute the High Master."

"But it was not the whole reason?" Mr. Urman pressed.

"No, Mr. Urman. The High Master was originally arrested because one of the King's agents discovered that the High Master had been in correspondence with me for the past four years."

The whispers that had continued in the entry hall died suddenly, as though the audience were a prisoner whose neck had cracked on the gallows. In the utter silence that followed, Layle Smith said, "High Master Millard and I first became acquainted with one another when we were both apprentices under the same master torturer in the Hidden Dungeon. Four years ago, during a trip to Vovim that was undertaken at the Queen's request, I briefly renewed my acquaintance with the High Master. Shortly thereafter, he and I entered into private correspondence concerning the work conditions in our respective dungeons."

For a breath's pause, the audience did not react. Then, to a man, everyone's head turned in the direction of the Queen's guards.

Barrett had already turned his gaze that way, from the moment he heard the words "private correspondence." The guards were in sentry position, with their right hands resting on the hilts of their ceremonial swords, while their left hands, in a more practical manner, rested upon their pistols.

Their gazes were directed toward the unarmed High Seeker. The expression of the magistrate between them was unreadable.

Barrett took a moment to glance at Mr. Sobel. Concern was written across the other guard's face, but no surprise. Barrett supposed his own face looked the same.

The High Seeker did not turn round to look at the Queen's guards and representative. Instead, he said to his audience, "Nearly all of you here know of the long tradition that exists in dungeons of the world, by which torturers exchange information with one another, in the same fashion that healers exchange information with their foreign colleagues, regardless as to whether their respective countries are at peace or at war. These exchanges of information are always dangerous and are often considered treasonous by the leaders of the countries in which the torturers live." The High Seeker paused again, and Barrett wondered whether everyone else in the entry hall was joining him in holding breath suspended. Finally the High Seeker said, "I spoke with the Queen this morning concerning my correspondence with High Master Millard, and she accepts my statement that I engaged in this correspondence in the hopes of bringing benefit to Yclau." He turned suddenly and gave an old-fashioned bow to the magistrate. The magistrate bowed back.

A collective sigh rose from the floor and stairs of the entry hall, like morning mist. The bats, apparently treating this as a signal of peace, settled down together on the back of Elsdon Taylor's abandoned chair, hanging down from the top rung.

The High Seeker turned back to face the dungeon dwellers, and without missing a beat, he said, "You have a question, Mr. Boyd?"

Barrett felt his heart thump hard, as it always did when the High Seeker noticed him. "I was wondering whether the High Master was seeking to be disloyal to his King, sir."

"He was not." Layle Smith's voice was crisp. "High Master Millard's loyalty to his King was exemplary, as is well known in Vovim. Indeed, the full extent of his loyalty, and the sacrifices he made on the King's behalf, are only just now beginning to be revealed. No one in Vovim doubts the High Master's loyalty or believes that he was engaging in treasonous

behavior when he sought to reform his dungeon, as his powers lawfully permitted. It appears" – the High Seeker's voice went suddenly dry as he turned his gaze toward the rest of his audience – "that the King of Vovim slew the High Master out of pique, because the High Master had been in correspondence with Vovim's traditional enemy."

"Not Yclau – the High Seeker," murmured Mr. Urman in Barrett's ear. "He's the one that the King hates most."

Barrett nodded. It was well known that the Vovimian King's temper raged high whenever he heard the name of the torturer who had broken his oath of loyalty to Vovim by fleeing to Yclau in order to work in the Eternal Dungeon. Layle Smith had only made matters worse, in the King's eyes, by using international pressure, through the United Order of Prisons, to try to reform Vovim's dungeon and prisons.

"Mr. Sobel." The words snapped like a whiplash over the crowd, silencing everyone.

"Sir," the guard acknowledged the High Seeker's notice of him. "I'm wondering whether all of this has anything to do with the present civil unrest in Vovim, and the King's threats of war against Yclau."

Barrett cast an admiring look at Mr. Sobel. The senior-most guard was known chiefly for his strength and quickness in dealing with prisoners. Only occasionally would the guard provide brief hints that his mind could be as quick as his body.

"It does, Mr. Sobel." The note of approval in the High Seeker's voice was subtle but clear to all who knew him. "Because the King killed the High Master for corresponding with Yclau, he blames Yclau for the High Master's death." He gave his audience a moment to digest this contorted logic, and then added, "As for the internal unrest within Vovim, it is due to the High Master's death. The King's decision to execute his head torturer upon a whim has made the king's lords nervous."

"But he always executes his High Masters!" cried Mr. Crofford, eager that his point should not be forgotten.

"He does, Mr. Crofford, and he has also executed quite a few men of power since taking the throne. Until now, though, the remaining lords were able to delude themselves into thinking that the King only executed traitors, and that they themselves, being loyal, were immune to arbitrary arrests. The High Master's death has stripped that delusion from them. They now know that, if the King's favorite can be given a prolonged death for little reason, they too are in danger. And that is where the Eternal Dungeon enters into this matter, gentlemen. And ladies," he added belatedly.

Mr. Urman leaned back against the wall, his arms folded, a sardonic look on his face, as though he had heard all of this many times before. Barrett noticed, though, that Mr. Urman was nudging the newspaper out of the way with his foot.

Even the remaining bats seemed to have given their full attention to the proceedings. They hung from the chair-back rungs, occasionally wiping their faces with their wings, but showing no sign of wishing to search the entry hall for any bugs that might have wandered in from the lighted world. A senior Seeker who was standing on a step immediately behind the chairs – Mr. Ferris – casually put a hand out to steady himself upon the back of Mr. Taylor's chair. One of the bats nudged its way over till it was hanging from Mr. Ferris's hand, its claws digging into the Seeker's skin. Mr. Ferris glanced down, appeared to assess the small torturer for a moment, and then looked up again without moving. Amused, Barrett turned his attention back to the High Seeker.

Mr. Smith was saying, "Few Vovimians care whether prisoners are treated in a just manner, but their King's decision to execute his head torturer and abolish the code of conduct established by High Master Millard has become a political issue. The lords who wish to gain power over the King, in hopes of stopping the arbitrary killings, are now demanding that the King reinstitute the old High Master's code. The King, and other lords who remain loyal to him, oppose this move. Every man in that conflict is aware that the High Master loosely patterned his code after the *Code of Seeking*. As a result, the Eternal Dungeon will be the focus of much attention from Vovim and similar-minded nations in the weeks to come. . . . That would be reason enough to call this meeting. However, the Codifier received a communication last night by government courier that is as important as

the news I have just told you, if not more so. He has given me permission to read the letter to you."

From where he stood, Barrett could only see that the letter Mr. Smith pulled from his pocket was on the blue stationery used by the land to the northwest of Yclau, which had been a disputed territory for several centuries between Yclau and Vovim until Yclau's Queen dealt with the rivalry by granting the land its independence five years before. Barrett cast a final glance at Mr. Ferris, whose eyes remained fixed on the High Seeker. Mr. Ferris was now using his free hand to lightly rub the back of the sleepy little bat.

The High Seeker's voice rang through the entry hall.

> *The fourth day of the sixth month of 360 in the Tri-National Era.*
>
> To Mr. J. Daniels, Codifier of the Eternal Dungeon (founded 202, in succession to a prior royal dungeon), The Queendom of Yclau.
>
> My dear Sir,
>
> I am writing on behalf of the executive committee of the United Order of Prisons, Dungeons, and Places of Execution to inform you of a new policy that has been passed by the committee today, in accordance with a recommendation made to us last summer by the code committee of our Order.
>
> This policy requires that all member nations of the United Order of Prisons restrict uses of physical punishment, corporal discipline, torture, or any similar acts, to self-defense or the punishment of deeds that bring grave danger to the prison workers, prisoners, or outsiders. Specific acts that may be addressed through the use of physical pain are physical assaults by prisoners on prison workers or fellow prisoners, attempts to escape, and conspiracies by prisoners to lead riots. Other acts bringing grave danger may be addressed by physical pain, but only upon review and approval by this Order.
>
> It has been brought to our attention that the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking* (fifth revision, issued in 344, author L. Smith et al.) is not

in compliance with our new policy. Your dungeon's code permits the use of physical pain (referred to in your code as "torture") in all instances where the prisoners violate the portions of the code which are applicable to them. This amounts to 48 potential offences; these offences can be as trivial as lying or failing to address formally the prison worker who is searching him (the "Seeker"). Moreover, your code permits Seekers to make use of physical pain while searching prisoners for information concerning their alleged crimes, an action that our new policy strongly condemns.

I have enclosed on a separate page the exact wording of our new policy. I ask you to take special note of the section identifying the means by which physical pain may be administered. Racks are not mentioned in that section.

As you know, one of the requirements of membership in the United Order of Prisons is that the member nations be willing to accept the judgment of the Order on matters concerning ethical conditions in prisons, dungeons, and places of executions. The United Order of Prisons has exercised its power to recommend changes in ethical policy only six times in its 150-year career. On each occasion, the Eternal Dungeon has made the necessary adjustments to its conditions, although on two occasions (in 322 and 336) the Eternal Dungeon requested and received permission to delay the institution of such changes until the next revision of its code.

We trust that we will have the Eternal Dungeon's full cooperation on this matter, as we have in all past cases. I should add that, as in the past, member nations that refuse to comply with the Order's ethical policies may face expulsion from the Order and additional penalties, such as international embargoes.

With best wishes,
Arthur Jones-Brown
Keeper, Mercy Life Prison (founded 355), The Magisterial Republic of Mip
On behalf of the executive committee of the United Order of Prisons

> *Postscriptum.* Mr. Edwards of the communications committee has asked me to convey the information that he has received Mr. Smith's letter, dated last month, requesting that his committee make enquiries to Vovim concerning the rumors of High Master Millard's demise. Mr. Edwards will be in touch with the High Seeker shortly.

Barrett was barely able to hear the final words of the letter; by the time the second paragraph had been read, the entry hall was in an uproar. The bats, startled, flew up and circled uneasily around the men and women reacting with raised voices to this news of a dramatic change in the dungeon's fortunes.

Barrett kept his eye on the High Seeker. He was no longer trying to read the shadowed eyes; he was watching Mr. Smith's chest as it rose once, taking in a deep breath of air, then rose a second time, and then rose a third. Before Barrett could worry about these aborted attempts at speech, the High Seeker's voice cut through the crowd, and Barrett understood.

"Mistress Birdesmond," the High Seeker said, "do have something you wish to say?"

The audience softened at once to a murmur, several of the audience members turning to check what posture of the junior Seeker had alerted the High Seeker to her burning need to speak.

Whatever it was, Barrett could read only calmness in her pose as she responded. "I apologize for disrupting your news, High Seeker," she said, as though she alone had been roaring at the top of her lungs. "I am curious about the letter's reference to the Order's code committee. I was under the impression that you are chairman of that committee."

"I am." The High Seeker, quite noticeably, did not look in the junior Seeker's direction as he replied. "This new policy arose from a proposal I made to the committee last summer that the Order require its members to apply physical pain only under the circumstances that our own queendom permits, namely when the written code of the dungeon or prison has been violated. Until now, as I'm sure you know, a number of the Order's members have held to the policy that physical pain can be applied under any circumstances considered advisable by the individual prison worker

who applies the pain. I, and several other members of the committee, had hoped to require that pain be applied under more narrow circumstances. Some of the younger members of the committee, however, felt that my proposal did not go far enough. I and the other committee members who shared my views were overruled."

There was silence now, as the bats continued to circle cautiously overhead. The junior Seeker did not follow up on her remark; the High Seeker allowed himself to look from side to side of the assembly before him.

"All of you know," he said in a voice quieter than before, "that Yclau was one of the founding members of the United Order of Prisons, whose mission is to encourage ethical practices in lawful places of captivity around the world. For the first one hundred and thirty years after the Order was founded, it had few member nations and exerted little influence. Then, in 344, the Order voted to require its members to create written codes of conduct for the workers in their dungeons."

"That's the year the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking* was published," Mr. Urman whispered to Barrett. "Not a coincidence."

The High Seeker continued, "All of the codes bear a certain similarity to one another, and as a result, the joint impact of them has been great. The Order has swelled to four times the size it was in 344, all of the new member nations being required to create codes of conduct for their dungeons as they join. Indeed, some nations – not yet ours, I regret to say – have also created codes of conduct for their lesser prisons. It is perhaps inevitable that, as newer members joined who had already received the benefits of the older members' work, the newer nations would feel the desire to make their own contributions to the creation of such codes."

Barrett wondered whether the High Seeker really believed this: that the conflict implicit in the Order's letter was nothing more than a case of new, adolescent nations wishing to challenge the greater wisdom of their elders. Barrett's gaze fell to the newspaper lying on the ground near him. It was open to the article about the Commoners' Guild.

The world was changing, he thought. It was no longer what it had been in 344, when Layle Smith's revision of the *Code of Seeking*, with shocking boldness, abolished centuries of received wisdom on how to treat

prisoners. Now a new generation had arrived that wished to take Layle Smith's principles and apply them a step further. And the High Seeker, it seemed, could not see this.

Barrett had already sensed that, even before the High Seeker said, "I have discussed this matter with the Codifier and the Queen on several occasions since last summer, and I have also held conversations with this dungeon's senior Seekers. The Queen, the Codifier, and I are agreed that the *Code of Seeking*, in its present form, provides the necessary balance between controlling the prisoners with too much harshness and granting them greater mercy than their cases merit. We hold firm to this balance, in opposition to nations that would treat their prisoners with undue harshness or undue lightness."

Barrett took note of the fact that the senior Seekers' thoughts on this matter had not been mentioned. He looked quickly over to the steps. A few of the Seekers there, such as Mr. Ferris, were exchanging glances with one another, but the majority of senior Seekers, he saw, were nodding in agreement.

The response of the junior Seekers and senior guards was more neutral, while the junior guards seemed downright restless in their response to the news. The High Seeker turned his head toward them suddenly, and they all froze, as if sighting a predator. Barrett could feel, though, the tension in Mr. Urman as the junior guard muttered something under his breath.

The High Seeker did not speak for a minute more. He looked, Barrett thought, like a wildcat waiting patiently for his craven prey to emerge from its hole. Finally Mr. Smith said, in a voice so quiet that it forced silence to all lingering whispers, "This is a moment of crisis in the Eternal Dungeon's history. Neither I nor the Codifier nor the Queen treat lightly the threats made against us by the United Order of Prisons and the Kingdom of Vovim. All eyes of the world will be turned to this dungeon in the coming weeks, to see how we react to the recent events. We must conduct ourselves accordingly."

Barrett flicked a glance at Elsdon Taylor, still standing close to the platform. His back was to Barrett, and there was nothing in his posture to indicate his reaction to the speech. He looked the same as he always did at

public pronouncements such as this: calm and ready to step forward in order to offer the High Seeker his support as soon as the speech was through.

"Beginning at the end of this week," said Mr. Smith, "there will be a daily training session for junior guards, held during the dusk shift. Those of you who are junior guards have been learning your duties in the traditional manner, through informal instruction, but the Codifier and I believe that, during these days of crisis, it is vital that you understand the foundations of the Code of Seeking. Attendance at this training is required for all junior guards; other members of the inner dungeon are encouraged to attend. Even those of you who have been senior guards for many years are likely to benefit from what is said there."

Next to Barrett, Mr. Urman sighed heavily. Before he or any other junior guard had an opportunity to mutter remarks about lost leisure time, though, the High Seeker added, "One matter all of you need to know, guards and Seekers alike: This dungeon's policy toward punishment of inner dungeon members will undergo a slight change."

The audience seemed to shift in place, like bats rustling their wings. Barrett looked over his shoulder at the senior Seekers and saw surprise in the eyes of many of them. Mr. Ferris's eyes had narrowed.

The High Seeker's voice continued in a level manner, as though he had not noticed the turn in mood. "As all of you know, members of the inner dungeon are immune from Yclau law. If we break a civil law within this dungeon or in the portion of the palace devoted to justice, we cannot be arrested by Yclau's soldiers – which is to say that Seekers cannot be arrested for violation of civil law at all, since we are not ordinarily permitted to pass beyond those bounds. Seekers, and to a large extent guards, are allowed to break civil law where that law comes into conflict with the Code."

"If they weren't," Mr. Urman murmured, "you wouldn't be sleeping with Mr. Taylor, would you?"

Mr. Sobel shushed Mr. Urman while Barrett passed his hand over his mouth to hide his smile. It was true enough that Yclau's archaic laws prevented men from sleeping with anyone over the age of eighteen, unless

their bed-partner was their wife. The Seekers – imprisoned eternally in a dungeon with virtually no underage youths and with no recourse to marriage – had gone their own way in such matters, as in many others. There had been tension in the early years of the Eternal Dungeon, Barrett had heard, when the *Code of Seeking* began to deviate from civil law, but the Queen at that time had dealt with the matter by enshrining in Yclau law the Seekers' right to create their own laws, provided that those laws were not exercised outside the dungeon.

And so, in the Eternal Dungeon, full-grown men slept with full-grown men, a fact that had shocked Barrett when he first arrived only because such affairs were openly spoken of here. In the lighted world, the old laws against men sleeping with men were routinely broken, but in a covert manner. "I spent the night in bed with my boy," one of Barrett's friends in the army had once said with a wink, and everyone around him had understood that his "boy" was the middle-aged civilian man he spent time with. Here in the Eternal Dungeon, no such coded messages were needed, for the Queen's laws did not extend this far.

Mr. Smith said, "The Eternal Dungeon originally petitioned for this right, not in order to protect the Seekers against the consequences of any heinous deeds they might commit, but in order to protect the Code. The circumstances in which we live and work are so different from that of the lighted world, that at times we must permit acts which are forbidden to ordinary men, and at other times we must forbid acts which are permitted to ordinary men."

Barrett had heard this statement many times – it was a central passage in the fifth revision of the Code – but again he saw a rustling of uneasiness ripple through the onlookers, as though they were all taking in the meaning of the High Seeker's words for the first time.

"In the lighted world," the High Seeker continued relentlessly, "it is a magistrate who determines the sentence of an offending prisoner. He does so after receiving evidence from various parties; the trial is held in public. If the prisoner appeals sentence to the Queen, then the case may be tried by a higher magistrate, and so on up to the highest courts, and even to the Queen herself. The lowliest prisoner has the right to appeal to the Queen's mercy, and if she fails to give it, the lowliest prisoner has the right to

appeal to the people whom the Queen rules, if he believes that he has been wronged. Every prisoner in the land of Yclau retains this privilege, including the prisoners of this dungeon, who have been accused of the worst of crimes: kin-murder, treason, the rape of virgins. Every man and woman in Yclau, our great queendom, possesses this right." The High Seeker paused, his gaze sweeping over the crowd that silently watched him, anticipating his final words. "You do not."

Even Mr. Urman remained voiceless in the pause that followed. Finally the High Seeker said, with a tone so light that he might have been discussing flower-weaving for the Lords' Spring Festival, "This is one of the many sacrifices that we as Seekers and guards make for the sake of our prisoners: We agree that the only law we follow within this dungeon will be the Code. In the original *Code of Seeking*, and in every revision since then, it has been determined that any man who takes employment within the inner dungeon – or any woman – thereby gives up his right of appeal. Final decisions in all disciplinary matters are made by one man: myself. As always, I am supervised by the Codifier, who in turn is supervised by the Queen's magistrates. But if you are arrested on a serious charge, you will not be turned over to a magistrate for a public trial whose judgment you may appeal. I will decide your sentence, and unless the Codifier overturns my judgment, the sentence I place upon any guilty prisoner will be carried out immediately."

Barrett looked over at Mr. Sobel. The older guard's memory of the Eternal Dungeon stretched back further than Barrett's; Mr. Sobel had been a guard under Layle Smith's predecessor. Barrett had heard whispered tales of what those times had been like. Seekers and guards would disappear without warning, and when they reappeared, it would be in the form of ashes, to be buried in the communal pit at the dark end of the dungeon. No public notice was ever issued at the time of their arrests; no explanation was ever given for their deaths. In those days, it was said, torturers and guards had trod tenderly in the presence of the High Torturer.

All that had changed when Layle Smith came to power and turned the torturers into Seekers. Though in theory he still held the power of life and death over every member of the inner dungeon, Barrett knew of only two cases where he had exercised it: in both cases, the men executed had been

guards who had blatantly abused their power over prisoners on more than one occasion. It lay within the High Seeker's power to torture his prisoners, but he had not done so in those cases. Instead, he had consulted with the senior Seekers before making the arrests, had asked the Codifier to call in witnesses on the prisoners' behalf, and had permitted the prisoners to see their loved ones before their executions. The days of execution had been known beforehand to everyone, and by the time the prisoners' ashes had arrived at the communal pit, the general sentiment had been that the prisoners were lucky to have been tried under so fair a magistrate.

Mr. Sobel was frowning, which might have meant anything: concern at what the High Seeker was saying, concentration on his words, or simply annoyance that the audience, once again, was reacting with uneasiness at Mr. Smith's pronouncements. Barrett turned his attention back to the speaker in time to hear Mr. Smith say, "Our critics – both those who consider the Code too lax and those who consider it too harsh – argue that, when Seekers and guards bring about the repentance and renewal in prisoners that is always our primary aim, we do so despite the Code, not because of it."

This time the murmur in the crowd was clearly of anger, and the anger was not aimed toward the High Seeker. Barrett saw Mr. Taylor form his hands into fists and then quickly release them again. Mr. Smith waited a moment before acknowledging his listeners' anger with a nod. "Few of our critics have had the opportunity to witness for themselves the breaking and rebirth of our prisoners, under the rules of the Code; thus, their perspective is limited. Nonetheless . . ." His voice lingered on the word as he turned his head to scan the crowd. ". . . these criticisms have a certain force. On too many occasions over the years, the rules of the Code have been bent or broken with impunity. I am to blame for that. I did not hold enough faith in the Code to trust its limits, and now the Eternal Dungeon is paying the price for my faithlessness."

Watching the stunned reaction of the junior guards to this candid confession of fault, Barrett wondered whether any of those guards realized how carefully they were being manipulated by the High Seeker. Barrett himself had only witnessed Mr. Smith at work with a prisoner on one

occasion, but he had seen, that previous year, how the High Seeker could use apparent displays of weakness as a means to trap a prisoner into following his will.

It appeared that the High Seeker would have his way again. One junior guard, more bold than the rest, cried out, "You're not to blame, sir!" Most of the other junior guards – and a good many junior Seekers also – murmured their agreement, seemingly moved by the sight of so powerfully ranked a man confessing his misdeeds to lesser-ranked men. Mr. Urman – who had worked long enough under the High Seeker to know his methods – simply rolled his eyes.

"Thank you, gentlemen." The High Seeker began to turn toward the women, perhaps to include them in his thanks, but quickly turned back. Mistress Birdesmond had the advantage of keeping her expression hooded from the onlookers, but the temporary healer appeared not at all moved by the High Seeker's confession. Perhaps her mind had flitted ahead to what must follow from such words.

Mr. Smith made no delay in stating his conclusion. "I will not repeat my mistakes of the past. The Code itself provides abundant flexibility. It offers a range of punishments for most crimes, and it permits the granting of mercy in cases where a prisoner committed his misdeed out of ignorance or pressure or unwonted fear. As in the past, I will follow the Code's lead in bestowing mercy where it is merited. But from this point henceforth" – the High Seeker's voice suddenly deepened – "I will not ameliorate the consequences for anyone who deliberately breaks the Code. I will bring down the full penalties upon any Seeker, guard, prisoner, or other member of the inner dungeon who intentionally breaks the Code, in however small a matter. That is all I have to say today."

With typical swiftness, the High Seeker was off the platform before the magistrate, staring at the empty space where Layle Smith had stood, had time to take in that the proclamation was finished. The residents of the inner dungeon, more used to Layle Smith's abrupt manner of ending meetings, had already begun to move. Guards were unbarring the doors leading out of the entry hall, the Codifier was disappearing into his office, junior Seekers were beginning to climb down from their seats, and the gates above were sliding back with a clank. The little bat, sensing his

opportunity, rose from his perch upon Mr. Ferris's hand and flew fleetly up the stairs.

The guards who were free of immediate duties had already begun to gather in clusters to discuss excitedly – though in suitably low voices – the contents of the speech. The Seekers, trained to be more discreet, were catching each other's eyes, as though to say, "We must talk of this, once we're behind closed doors." The expressions in their eyes told clearly enough, though, what they thought of what they had heard.

Looking around, Barrett decided that little had changed since the beginning of the speech. Most of the Seekers and senior guards supported what Mr. Smith had said; despite the High Seeker's best efforts, most of the junior guards were angry. Mr. Urman, without asking leave of Mr. Sobel, hurried forward to join his voice with the other junior guards who were beginning to raise their voices in protest at what they had heard.

As Mr. Urman went, he passed by Mr. Crofford. The young guard was staring down at the dagger sheathed at his left hip. Quickly, as though his life depended upon it, he moved the sheathed dagger to his right hip.

Barrett felt a heaviness come upon him then. He turned, opening his mouth to say he-knew-not-what to Mr. Sobel, but the words shrivelled on his tongue as he saw Mr. Sobel's expression. He followed the other guard's gaze.

The High Seeker, as was always the case, had not adopted the safe course by retreating into his office; he was standing in front of the platform, answering questions from all comers. His head turned as he spoke, however, as though he were missing someone in the crowd. He soon found what he was seeking: Elsdon Taylor, who had not yet come forward to join him.

For a moment, the gazes of the two Seekers remained locked. Then, in a deliberate manner, Mr. Taylor turned his back on the High Seeker and began to listen to a handful of junior Seekers who were denouncing the High Seeker's decisions.

Barrett's eyes met Mr. Sobel's. The other man, grave-faced, said nothing. After a moment, both guards looked away from each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

As always at the dawn shift, the entrance to the outer dungeon's dining hall was crowded with night-shift guards coming off duty to eat a leisurely supper, as well as day-shift guards catching a quick breakfast before they went on duty. Using the privilege of his rank – a privilege much needed on days like this, when his time was short – Barrett bypassed the long queue for outer-dungeon laborers, the shorter queue for junior guards and junior Seekers, and headed for the briefest queue of all, for senior guards and senior Seekers. He passed Mr. Taylor on the way; the young Seeker did not notice Barrett, being absorbed in conversation with another junior Seeker.

It bemused Barrett that, in theory anyway, his rank was greater than that of his new Seeker. In practice, if a senior guard overturned the orders of a junior Seeker for any reason other than to resolve an emergency, he was likely to receive a beating shortly thereafter, under the watchful eye of the High Seeker. Every guard who had undergone this exercise agreed that the High Seeker's watchful eye was worse than the beating.

Senior rank had its advantages for a guard, though. For one thing, he could give orders to junior guards without discussing them first with a Seeker. Of yet greater importance, to Barrett's mind, was that the food in the dungeon's dining hall was still likely to be hot by the time he tasted it.

He had nearly reached the door when he tripped over an obstacle. Looking down, he saw four-year-old Finlay, who was sitting cross-legged as he sketched people in the queue with a piece of charcoal upon paper.

Artistry was an unusual ambition for an Yclau child, but Finlay was said to have pawed through the High Seeker's collection of art books one day while his father was discussing business in Mr. Smith's living cell. Since that time, Finlay was a predictable presence at any large gathering in the outer dungeon; he always had pencil or charcoal or crayon in hand, creating portraits that bore a certain rough resemblance to the people he saw.

At age thirty-two, Barrett was still a bachelor, though he no longer had the excuse of his army career to explain his periodic visits to brothels rather than to tea parties where respectable women might be courted. Any time he began to be tempted to settle into domestic life, he had only to visit Mr.

Sobel's living quarters, filled with the stink of babies' groin-cloths and with Finlay shouting his insistence that he would die if his parents didn't buy him a new sketch-pad.

Still, Barrett found children tolerable in small doses. Crouching down, he pointed to the mess of lines, asking, "Is that me?"

Finlay cast him a scornful look. "It's the lady."

Glancing round, Barrett finally found the "lady": a rotund washerwoman. Barrett looked again at the sketch. With greater scrutiny, he saw how the messy lines represented the washerwoman's face, alight with enjoyment as she exchanged gossip with a neighbor.

"You have a gift," Barrett said with such surprise that Finlay gave him another scornful look.

"I've been working all year," he said, as though presenting his twenty-years' credentials as a craftsman.

"So I see," replied Barrett, trying hard not to laugh. Mr. Sobel, he knew, treated his eldest child's ambitions with the greatest seriousness, though he could hardly be happy that Finlay had chosen work which would place him in the commoners' class, unless the boy lost his head entirely and moved to Vovim, where artists held higher rank. Barrett supposed that Mr. Sobel was simply hoping that Finlay would outgrow his ambition. Rising to his feet, Barrett had a sudden vision of Finlay in a dozen years: a young man as handsome as his father, stubbornly determined to remain an artist, no matter what price he paid.

Barrett felt his heart's pace increase.

He shook his head as he turned away. He could not decide whether Mr. Sobel would be amused or appalled to know that Barrett had been inwardly stirred at the thought of what Finlay might become, but perhaps it was time for Barrett to put down roots by taking a woman or youth as his love-mate – perhaps even a man, since the Code permitted him that.

The trouble was in deciding where to send down those roots.

A waiter was standing by the door when Barrett arrived at the head of the queue. "Will you sit at the head table as usual, sir?" the man asked briskly, smoothing down the napkin draped over his forearm.

"Yes. —No, wait." He craned his neck to see the head table, where senior guards and their guests usually sat and where, in theory, senior Seekers could sit. The Seekers, though, usually took food in their living cells, since eating while wearing a hood was not the easiest activity. Mr. Taylor was one of the few Seekers regularly seen in the dining hall, and even he often opted to dine in the cell he shared with the High Seeker.

Mr. Sobel was nowhere to be seen at the head table, and Barrett really did not relish the idea of listening to the other senior guards comment on how wise the High Seeker was to enforce the Code. He glanced round the room, which was the largest in the outer dungeon, but was certainly not large enough to accommodate all the dungeon dwellers at one time. Finally he caught sight of Mr. Phelps, who was junior night guard to Elsdon Taylor. He was sitting with two other guards who had their backs to Barrett.

"At Mr. Phelps's table, if you please," he said, pointing. The waiter went down on both knees in acknowledgment of the command – the laborers in the Eternal Dungeon tended to be as old-fashioned as their surroundings – and then quickly rose and began breaking their path to the table through the crowd of junior guards and Seekers who must find their own way to the tables.

A good opportunity, Barrett thought, to get to know better the guard who would be working directly under him. He had been somewhat worried when he learned of his appointment; a junior guard who failed to be appointed to an open senior position above him could make life miserable for the guard who took his place. But one brief talk with Mr. Phelps after the closed meeting in the entry hall had provided Barrett with the measure of the man. Mr. Phelps was without ambition, happy to be working in the Eternal Dungeon, but with no aspirations to rise above his present position. Indeed, he was the sort of guard who, while able to take initiative where needed, preferred following orders – the perfect sort of junior guard, from Barrett's perspective. He had heard that Mr. Urman had provided a less happy life for his senior guards through the years.

Too late, as they approached the table, Barrett saw that one of Mr. Phelps's companions was Mr. Urman. Before Barrett could decide whether the pleasure of Mr. Phelps's company would be worth the accompanying commentary by Mr. Urman, Mr. Phelps rose to his feet.

"You may have my chair, sir," he said, holding the chair back in waiting, in clear acknowledgment of Barrett's higher rank. "I was about to join the queue." He jerked his head toward the line of men and women nearby, waiting to use one of the few water closets in the dungeon. It was installed for the sake of workers such as Mr. Phelps, who did not live in the dungeon and so could not make use of a chamber-pot in their rooms. More than one dungeon dweller such as Barrett, though, had been known to wait in the ever-long queue out of nostalgia for the conveniences of modern living that they had sacrificed upon leaving the lighted world. Barrett was sure that he was not the only dungeon dweller who, on nights when the chamber-pot filled to its brim, wondered whether the sacrifice was worth it.

Barrett took the proffered seat, sighing inwardly. To leave now would make clear enough which guard he was trying to escape, for nobody could think that he'd want to flee from the presence of the third man at the table, Mr. Crofford.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Urman to the younger guard as Barrett sat down. "That announcement was bloody nonsense. The High Seeker's wits have been addled again."

Mr. Crofford wriggled in his chair, as though he had sat in something nasty. "I'm not sure about that," he said in his usual soft, hesitant voice. "Mr. Ferris says that Mr. Smith is just being a bit rash. He says that's natural in someone as young as the High Seeker is, and that he'll see things more clearly soon."

Mr. Urman snorted as the waiter, returning swiftly to the table, began setting down their food. In the Eternal Dungeon, there was no choice of menu; long-term dungeon residents ate the same food as the prisoners did, which meant they ate plain but well.

"The High Seeker is what – seventeen years older than you?" Mr. Urman responded with an angry gesture that nearly upset the water pitcher being

placed in front of him by the waiter. "And he's been a torturer since he was fifteen. He's had time and enough to learn his trade."

"He didn't come to the Eternal Dungeon till he was eighteen," Mr. Crofford protested as he neatly placed his napkin on his lap while the waiter slipped away.

"No, he didn't, did he?" Mr. Urman said in a significant fashion.

In the silence that followed, the only sound that could be heard, other than the loud, cheerful chatter of nearby dungeon dwellers, was the scrape of Mr. Urman's spoon on the bottom of his stew bowl. Then Mr. Crofford said, "That was a long time ago. He hasn't been a Vovimian torturer for years. And anyway, the Eternal Dungeon is a dungeon of torture too."

Mr. Urman raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps it shouldn't be."

Barrett sputtered into his stew spoon. Mr. Crofford was too busy looking shocked to notice. "Mr. Urman!" he said. "Don't say that you're one of those radicals who believes torture should be abolished!"

Mr. Urman gave a slight shrug that suggested world-weariness. "I've been working in prisons for nine years, since I was eighteen," he said, as though he were decades above Mr. Crofford in age, rather than only four years older. "I've learned that, if you hurt a prisoner enough, he'll say anything he thinks you want to hear. Which is all very well if you're interested in nothing but a confession. But here in the Eternal Dungeon, we're supposed to be interested in more than just an admission of guilt."

"The Code permits torture," Barrett said, drawn into the conversation despite himself.

"If you look at the first version of the Code, from a century and a half ago, you'll see that it permitted use of the strappado. Times change, Mr. Boyd. When prison workers are wise enough to admit to past errors, times change for the better."

Barrett fell silent, returning his attention to the stew, for Mr. Urman's remark came perilously close to thoughts that had long littered his mind late at night, when he was unable to sleep after a day of racking a prisoner. It was Mr. Crofford who responded, "Mr. Ferris says that external pain is

sometimes necessary to make a prisoner's mind break through into recognition of the horrors he has committed by bringing pain to the world."

Mr. Urman snorted again as he waved down the waiter, who was passing their table. "So lawful pain will teach him that unlawful pain is wrong? You and your fine Mr. Ferris never took lessons in logic, I'd guess. —This stew is cold," he told the waiter. "Doesn't anyone here know how to give proper service?"

The waiter looked down his nose at Mr. Urman. "I wouldn't know about that, sir. Did you receive better training in such matters?"

"You bloody—!" Mr. Urman was on his feet in an instant, nearly spilling his stew as he grabbed the waiter by his collar with one hand and swung back his fist with the other. Before Barrett could think to react, Mr. Crofford had bounced up and pinioned Mr. Urman's arms behind him.

"D., no!" the younger guard said urgently. "The High Seeker is watching!"

Mr. Urman went still at once. Barrett quickly located the High Seeker, but Layle Smith, if he had noticed anything, was doing a good job of pretending that he was absorbed in conversation with Elsdon Taylor, who had just entered the dining hall.

The waiter, looking shaken, smoothed down his shirt. "My apologies, sir," he said to Mr. Urman. "My remark was uncalled for."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry too," replied Mr. Urman as he shook himself free from Mr. Crofford and sat down. "I'm sorry you don't know how to deliver a bowl of stew when it's still warm. Now get out of my sight."

The waiter's lips thinned, but he departed. Barrett said, keeping his voice mild, "You won't make friends that way."

"I don't need friends; I need people to stop ragging me about my accent. You never see anyone ragging Mr. Chapman about his accent, and he was born a commoner. I just picked up the accent from my classmates."

"You're too easy to tease," Mr. Crofford suggested, eyeing Mr. Urman carefully as he sat down, as though fearing he might attack someone else.

"Mr. Chapman merely laughs when anyone makes fun of his accent."

"Mr. Crofford is right," contributed Barrett. "If you learned to laugh at yourself, matters would go a lot easier for you here."

"Maybe I've had enough people laughing at me in my life without joining my mockery to theirs," Mr. Urman said, thrusting the stew away so quickly that it spilled on the tablecloth. "So what do you think of the High Seeker's announcement, Mr. Boyd? Or are you afraid the High Seeker will beat you if you're honest with your opinions?"

Barrett refused to be goaded. "My honest opinion," he said, "is that Finlay Sobel is headed in the direction of being a skilled artist."

Mr. Urman groaned. Mr. Crofford laughed, and then stopped abruptly, looking at something over Mr. Barrett's shoulder. A deep voice, filled with amusement, said, "Are you seeking to confirm the worst nightmares of a father about his best and brightest?"

Grinning, Barrett turned to pull an empty chair forward from a nearby table. "You could put an end to his sketches easily. He'd obey you if you told him to stop drawing."

Mr. Sobel shook his head as he seated himself beside Barrett. "My wife says those drawings are the best insight we could have into what's going through Finlay's mind. We worry, you know, about bringing up children in a place like this. —Thank you." This was to Mr. Crofford, who had passed a wicker basket of buns to Mr. Sobel.

"Judging from today's drawing, I'd say that you have nothing to fear," Barrett responded.

"Unless, of course, he begins drawing pictures of guards getting into fist fights with waiters." Mr. Sobel did not look up as he tore open a bun. "Mr. Urman, I never want to see a scene like that occurring in this dining hall again."

"The waiter made mock." Surprisingly, the respondent was Mr. Crofford.

Mr. Sobel flashed him a smile. "The High Seeker surmised as much. Which is why I was sent here to reprimand Mr. Urman, rather than the

High Seeker coming himself. Contrary to rumors, Mr. Smith does have a sense of justice."

Mr. Urman snorted, but had sense enough to keep quiet otherwise. Scattering bun crumbs into his stew, Barrett said, "Rumors are always flying about Layle Smith, but the latest dread foretellings are all speculation so far. The High Seeker likes to frighten prisoners so that he won't need to do worse than frighten them. He's likely doing the same to us."

"Oh, the High Seeker enjoys frightening prisoners, that's for certain," said Mr. Urman, tossing his napkin aside, as though he had lost interest in the meal. "In fact, I can think of only one thing Layle Smith enjoys more than frightening prisoners."

"If everyone behaves themselves, it won't come to that," Mr. Sobel responded, taking the glass of water that Mr. Crofford had poured and offered him. "And you had better learn to curb your tongue about such matters, Mr. Urman, because you've been reassigned."

"To Mr. Chapman?" Mr. Urman said. His voice was light, but Barrett saw the flash of hope in his eyes at the thought of the open senior guard position.

"To Mr. Smith. Junior night guard. We'll be working together again."

"I've already been his bloody junior night guard," Mr. Urman grumbled.

"Language, Mr. Urman," cautioned Mr. Sobel. "Even though you're off-duty, you should be setting an example for more junior guards." He nodded in the direction of Mr. Crofford.

"Oh, he already taught me that word," Mr. Crofford said with a smile. "He taught me an entire list of words to call my Seeker when he requires me to work overtime. Nobody gives vocabulary lessons like D. Urman."

Barrett collapsed into helpless laughter. Mr. Crofford and Mr. Sobel quickly followed him with chortles. After a moment of indecision as to whether he should take offense, Mr. Urman joined the merriment as people at the surrounding tables smiled.

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That night, though, while lying in his old bed in the lighted world, Barrett could not sleep. He got up, clothed himself in a dressing gown, and pulled open the curtains.

His childhood bedroom looked out upon the high-fenced walls of the back garden of a mid-class townhouse. The neatly mowed lawn was white as bones under the moonlight. Pushing one of the windowpanes open, Barrett leaned out, smelling the onion-sharp scent of summer grass. He had played croquet on that lawn with his sisters and brothers and cousins when he was young, absentmindedly hearing the grown-ups talk of city crime, and of the need for more patrol soldiers and prison workers.

His mother had wept with joy when he had left the army in order to become a guard in the Eternal Dungeon; his father had pounded him on the back, beaming as he said over and over, "A great honor. A great honor. The people of Yclau are in your debt."

Barrett closed the window and returned to the coolness of his bed, where he lay sleepless until dawn.

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. . . Too firmly, as history would later judge – but in saying that, we have the benefit of hindsight.

To the most objective observers of that time, the men who had no strong feelings one way or another on the issue of torture, the essential conflict in the Eternal Dungeon was not over prison ethics but over authority. If we recall the power that Layle Smith's predecessor had exercised over his torturers and guards, we see why that must be so. Yet we miss the point if we throw forth epithets like "dictator" about Layle Smith.

By the standards of his era, the Eternal Dungeon's High Seeker was an exceptionally generous employer. In an age when disobedience over the slightest matter would routinely result in the dismissal of an employee, Layle Smith stands out as having been strikingly willing to listen sympathetically to complaints about work conditions in his dungeon.

How, then, did a man like that become known, during the year 360, as a harsh and brutal employer? There is no paradox here; in fact, the answer lies in what appears to be the paradox of Layle Smith's gentleness toward the men who worked for him. But that is a matter which will become clearer as we turn our attention to events in the summer of 360.

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

***On Guard* 2**
PROTECTION

Seward Sobel
The year 360, the seventh month.

Guard: Assistant to the Seekers, charged with restraint.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER FIVE

"So then," said Mr. Urman as they walked down the corridor at the end of the dawn shift, "she said to me, 'You're not man enough for me.' And I told her, 'If you're seeking a man who will bully you, I can recommend some of my old classmates to you. They'd as soon slap a girl as kiss her.' She wouldn't listen to me, though. Honestly, Mr. Sobel, women are more trouble than they're worth."

"It often seems that way," Seward Sobel murmured in reply. The last thing he wanted to do was hear the latest shilling-shocker installment of Mr. Urman's love life – which, as far as Seward could tell, had never sailed on calm waters – but he had promised himself that he would endure all of what Mr. Urman considered friendliness, for the sake of keeping the junior guard in a good mood. In light of the junior guards' reaction to Layle Smith's speech in the entry hall during the previous week, Seward needed every ally he could get, even one as distasteful to him as Mr. Urman.

"And so you two weren't reconciled?" Seward said, stepping through the entry hall doorway. Then he stopped dead.

The entry hall – usually quiet and dark, ominously so for newly arriving prisoners – was ablaze with lights and bustle. Heavy crates were being carried down the stairway by huffing laborers, the palace's chief engineer was debating with other men in raised voices over the best way to lay electrical lines through the rocky hall, and the ordinarily imperturbable Record-keeper was shouting at one of the intruders.

"No, I do *not* need a modern, up-to-the-fashion cabinet for files!" he told a plump, balding man as he clutched a file box, as though it might be forcibly wrenched from his arms. "We've been using this filing system for decades. We have no need of any other."

"But, sir, surely you can see that you must move with the times," replied the plump man, smiling at the Record-keeper. He had the accent and clothes of a mid-class tradesman, and the manner of a man who is used to being obeyed. Seward's impression was confirmed in the same moment as the man, turning, snapped his fingers at a boy who was trying to wriggle his way past two guards. The boy immediately came over and took from his jacket a silver case. The man extracted a cut cigar from the case,

waited for the boy to light his corona with a mechanical lighter, and then puffed a ring of smoke into the air before saying, "You will find, sir, that your life will be immeasurably improved by these advances in technology. Certainly our Queen believes so, or she would not have ordered your office renovated."

The Record-keeper, red-faced, said nothing, though he looked as though he were grinding his teeth to keep from replying.

"Now," said the tradesman, giving his cigar to the boy to hold, "let me show you how much better this cabinet is. Rather than pull boxes off shelves, you simply lay the papers in a drawer, ordered by alphabet . . . so." He carelessly picked up a stack of paper from the Record-keeper's desk, opened a drawer of the filing cabinet that was currently blocking access to the Record-keeper's documents library, and laid the papers flat in the drawer. "And now, when you wish to find the records of a prisoner whose name begins with H, you need only pull open a drawer—"

"—or take a box from my library and carry it to any place in the dungeon I wish," the Record-keeper replied grimly. "I fail to see how this monstrosity will improve matters. The guards will still have to file the papers, will still have to tie them together—"

"My dear man, you don't mean to say that you continue to use *ribbons*." The tradesman looked as though he had just stumbled across an inhabitant from the era prior to the founding of the Tri-National Calendar. "Ribbons are quite, quite out of fashion now. All of the better offices use clips of metal, so that the papers need not be damaged with ribbon-holes."

"Are you saying" – the Record-keeper's voice rose – "are you saying that, in order to be modern and efficient, I must replace thousands of ribbons with these clips of yours?"

"The time that you will save in the long run— Where has that boy gone? Here, let me just fetch you a few of my paper clips, and you will see the genius, the absolute superiority of modern methods of— Sweet blood!" the tradesman practically screeched. "No, no, no, gentlemen, you are proceeding in the wrong manner!"

A group of guards, appearing bemused, looked up from a small metal device that they had been fiddling with. "Sir, this pointer of yours doesn't appear to work," said Mr. Yates.

"Of course it cannot work in the fashion you are using it." The tradesman took from the guard's hand a badly mangled pencil. "Sir, these pencil pointers can only be used to sharpen the points of round lead, not square."

The guards exchanged looks. "Round pencils?" said one finally. "Surely they'd roll off the table."

"But the time that you will save in having a mechanical pointer to sharpen those pencils . . . Where is that boy? Ah, there you are; give me the samples."

The boy, with a resigned look on his face, promptly pulled a second silver case from his jacket. The tradesman snatched it from him, opened it, and began passing out cylindrical pencils to everyone present.

"You see, sir," said the tradesman, beaming as he tucked a pencil into Seward's breast pocket, "you will find that all of the most up-to-the-fashion prisons use round pencils."

"Really?" said Mr. Urman, staring at his pencil. "I'd heard that the firm of Whittier & Sons had developed a mechanical pointer for square pencils."

The tradesman paled. "Surely not."

"Oh, yes, and for triangular pencils too," said Mr. Urman, his eyes wide and innocent as the other guards snickered behind the tradesman's back. "They use those in Vovim, you know. I understand that Whittier & Sons is ready to completely take over the export market within the year. You must have heard. . . ."

Seward, covering a smile with the back of his hand, took the opportunity to escape from Mr. Urman.

He paused in the middle of the cavern that constituted the entry hall. Usually all that could be heard in this hall was the murmured conversations of guards who were currently assigned paperwork duties, the

constant scratch of the Record-keeper's pen, and the occasional rustle of bat-wings from high above.

Now the cavern was filled with shouts, rattles, thumps, whistles, snatches of ballads, and laughter. Seward guessed that the ballads and laughter were bravado from the laborers who cast occasional, wary glances at the armed guards and even more wary glances at the few hooded Seekers in the hall. By following the direction of the wariest glances, Seward was able to locate the High Seeker.

Layle Smith was standing at the edge of the hall, near the entrance to the Codifier's office, surveying the laborers as they carried in picks, drills, spikes, and pliers. A more imaginative man than Seward might have assumed that Mr. Smith's interest in the laborers lay in the splendid possibilities that their tools offered for use in the rack room. As it was, Seward was reasonably sure that the High Seeker's mood at the moment was one of harassment.

Seward reached the High Seeker's side; Mr. Smith acknowledged his guard by handing over the clipboard he had been holding. It carried a formidable set of instructions from the Queen on how the laborers were to be accommodated.

Seward glanced through it, winced, and handed the clipboard back. Sticking to safe topics, he asked, "Is the renovation of the breaking cells likely to cause overcrowding, sir?"

"I doubt it." Mr. Smith's gaze lingered on a pulley being pushed through the hall. "For the time being, the Eternal Dungeon will only question prisoners accused of crimes involving royalty or the peerage. All other cases are being transferred to Front Royal."

Seward nodded. Front Royal Prison, located in a town thirty miles northeast of the capital – as the crow flies – was the closest lesser prison that was authorized to question men accused of capital crimes.

"Though I'm not sure," the High Seeker added, watching as two young laborers playfully tossed back and forth a metal rod of indeterminate purpose, "whether our latest prisoners will receive the proper impression of doom and gloom when they enter this dungeon."

Seward pointed his thumb in the direction of the tradesman, who had just waylaid a guard in order to explain to him the advantages of using cartridge pens rather than older-fashioned fountain pens. The guard was trying to escape from the tradesman's presence, but with no success. "Perhaps, Mr. Smith, we should simply hand over all our prisoners to Mr. Wyatt. His badgering sales technique may succeed where our whips and racks don't. The prisoners will be willing to give up their secrets simply to get away from him."

The High Seeker turned his gaze toward Sobel; there was an amused gleam in his eyes. "It may be that Mr. Wyatt has a sales delivery prepared for such situations. 'Now, sir, I wish you to examine the fine qualities of the latest, most modern designs in strappadoes. This first model, for example, can tear apart limbs from the trunk in less than twenty hoists. It is sold, for no extra cost, with a pair of pincers and one of our top-selling electrically heated red-hot irons . . .'"

The High Seeker's sense of humor was invariably much too dark for Seward. Turning his gaze away from the pulley, the pliers, and the rod, Seward said, "Well, sir, we should be glad that Mr. Wyatt hasn't chosen to introduce pneumatic tubes into the dungeon."

"Tubes!" Suddenly, without warning, the tradesman was at the High Seeker's elbow. "Mr. Smith, that reminds me of a very important fact. It is important – nay, vital – that we add talking tubes to your prisoners' cells so that, at any time, your prisoners may communicate with you. For just a slightly higher price—"

"Talking tubes?" said the High Seeker slowly, in the same tone of voice he used toward prisoners who had just confessed their intention to commit terrible crimes.

"To complement the pneumatic tubes that we will be laying in order to allow your healer to send documents instantly to this end of the dungeon, with none of that tedious walking back and forth which previous generations had to endure." Mr. Wyatt beamed. "Just think, sir, at any time of day or night, you will be able to receive spoken messages from your prisoners. . . ."

Seward, who was beginning to think that he would need to assign guards to the tradesman, solely in order to prevent Mr. Wyatt from being murdered by the High Seeker, was distracted from the conversation by sight of a guard who did not work under him. The guard – with the same terseness of communication as the man he worked for – simply nodded slightly to Seward. Murmuring his apologies, Seward quickly departed from the High Seeker, leaving him to explain to Mr. Wyatt why he did not wish to have talking tubes installed in his bedroom.

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Two minutes later, Seward stood in front of the desk of the Codifier, feeling as though he were visiting an inhabitant from the era prior to the founding of the Tri-National Calendar.

If modernization had reached the Codifier's office, there was no sign of it. Stalactites and stalagmites dripped and thrust from the ceiling and floor; the so-called Hooded Seeker Fish swum blindly in pools of water; more water trickled and gushed down the walls. Amidst these primitive surroundings, on one of the few dry patches of ground, the Codifier sat at a desk that looked as though it had stood there for the century and a half of the Eternal Dungeon's existence, wearing a suit such as his grandfather might have worn, and wielding, not a cartridge pen, not a fountain pen, but a quill pen. He was currently sharpening it with a whittling knife.

The only remotely modern item in the room was one of the oldest: the great, iron door at the back of the room, whose inner clock was set to allow the door to unlock at dawn and dusk, the times when the Codifier arrived and departed from the dungeon. That clock had finally rusted dead the previous winter, prompting the Queen's call for a renovation of the entire dungeon. The High Seeker, Seward knew, had managed successfully to stave off the renovation until recent events had defeated him.

The Codifier, having cut the quill nib to his exacting standards, looked up and said, "Mr. Sobel, do you recall the orders that you were given when you were first assigned to guard Mr. Smith, twenty-two years ago this autumn?"

"Yes, sir. You told me that my duty would be to prevent Layle Smith from murdering any prisoners."

Seward was rewarded with the rare opportunity of seeing the Codifier discomposed. Mr. Daniels's discomposure consisted of a slight pause as he put down his knife. "Yes, well," he said, "that turned out not to be as grave a danger as the High Torturer and I had feared. I was referring to your other orders."

Seward said slowly, "You told me to protect him from being murdered."

The Codifier slid open a drawer and brought out an object bundled in a black handkerchief. He pulled the handkerchief open and pushed the object over to Seward's side of the desk.

Seward picked up the revolver. After checking it briefly to be sure that all of the chambers were loaded and that the bolt was in the "safe" position, he slipped the revolver into the right pocket of his jacket. The jacket barely sagged. It had been specially designed for him, twenty-two-years before, having a padded pocket for the express purpose of concealing a pistol.

The Codifier appeared to consider the conversation over; he had returned to inspecting his quill. Seward knew from long experience, though, that he would be permitted to ask questions. Whether Mr. Daniels bothered to answer them depended on whether the Codifier considered those questions necessary.

Seward ventured, "The danger of assassination from the King of Vovim has returned?"

"Indeed. The same agent who brought word to our Queen of the recent unrest in Vovim also brought word that the King has ordered one of his own agents to kill our High Seeker – which one, we do not know. Ordinarily, the chances of assassination would be low, since few men are authorized to enter the inner dungeon. However, with the unfortunate coincidence of this dungeon's renovations . . ." The Codifier left his sentence unfinished.

Seward thought about it, and the more he thought about it, the less he liked the prospect. Dozens of unknown men swarming around the inner dungeon, permitted to enter every room except the crematorium and the

Seekers' living cells. Anywhere else, they might come within a few feet of the High Seeker.

Seward asked, "Am I to be the only man assigned to guard the High Seeker?"

"If you need assistance, you may assign a second guard to the task. You will understand, though, that discretion is imperative in this matter."

Seward nodded. Under the present circumstances, to openly admit that the High Seeker's life was in danger was to openly admit that the Eternal Dungeon had reason to believe that the King of Vovim had sent an assassin. Such an admission could only impair the delicate diplomatic talks that were currently taking place between the Queendom of Yclau and the Kingdom of Vovim.

"And during the High Seeker's off-duty hours, sir?" Seward persisted. "Will I be guarding him when he is asleep?" If he moved into Layle Smith's cell – as he had when Mr. Smith was a Torturer-in-Training – it would be a sure sign to everyone that something was wrong. Moreover, he suspected that his presence would place a certain inhibition on the High Seeker's bedroom activities with Elsdon Taylor, which would be likely to make Mr. Smith unhappy. For that matter, it would place a certain inhibition on his own bedroom activities, which would make his wife unhappy.

"No," replied the Codifier, turning his attention to the inkwell. "We have determined that Mr. Taylor received training in firearms as a youth – for the sake of shooting wild game, you understand – and that he has the proper temperament that would allow him to try to block any attacks on Mr. Smith during the High Seeker's off-duty hours."

Seward imagined this was so, or Elsdon Taylor would not have been sent to the Eternal Dungeon for a murder committed with his bare hands. "And the High Seeker? Is he content with having me serve as bodyguard?"

Mr. Daniels carefully dipped his quill into the inkwell. "Mr. Sobel, I am rather busy."

Seward murmured an apology and made his departure. He had received his answer to the most important question about his new duties. Alas, it was the wrong answer.

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A short while later, Elsdon Taylor answered the door to the cell he shared with the High Seeker. He had his hand behind his back until he saw who the visitor was; then he let the hand relax at his side. It was holding a revolver.

Seward acknowledged with a nod the junior Seeker's careful watch. He had already stopped briefly in the outer dungeon to inform his wife that he had been assigned extra duties that would keep him late in the inner dungeon. Returning to the inner dungeon, he had learned that Layle Smith had retreated to his cell, sooner than the High Seeker was accustomed to do at the end of his workday.

Nor was Mr. Taylor where Seward would have expected to see him in the hours following the end of his own workday. "Are you planning to go to the common room?" Seward asked, pausing to cough into his fist. The corridor behind him was filled, as always, with smoke from the furnaces that ran behind the eastern breaking cells, as well as the cheerful exchange of insults by the stokers. The stokers' conversation was undiminished in merriness from the past, for the men had been promised new, higher-paying jobs in the dungeon once the furnaces were removed. For now, though, the renovation had not yet reached this corridor; Seward felt safe to hold this conversation at the High Seeker's open doorway.

Elsdon – one of Seward's friends, and therefore a man whom Seward addressed informally on off-duty hours – glanced over his shoulder toward the room behind him. "Not tonight. Not till this matter is settled."

Seward shook his head. "Elsdon, if you don't permit yourself time with your friends, apart from your time with the prisoners and with the High Seeker, then we'll soon be transferring you to a lunatic asylum, and that won't do Mr. Smith any good. Leave him to me. An extra hour or two of duty won't break my marriage."

Elsdon, who had raised his hood when he saw who the visitor was, gave a wan smile. "Layle and I do tend to get on each other's nerves if we're in each other's vicinity too much of the time. We learned that when I was in training under him. It's not fair, though, that you should be burdened with this."

"It's one of my duties. Check my work contract if you don't believe me."

Elsdon laughed then. "He's been trying to shoo me out the door ever since he arrived back. Now that you're here, I can leave you to be the one to receive his shooing noises."

Seward wondered whether Elsdon was aware of how likely that scenario was. "Tap your code on the door when you return," he suggested. "Otherwise, I'm likely to be nervous when opening the door."

Elsdon frowned and then said in a low voice, "No, I'll tap my code backwards. The assassin might have discovered my code."

Seward nodded approvingly as Elsdon handed him his gun, pulled down the face-cloth of his hood, and slipped into the corridor. With a quick-thinking man like Elsdon Taylor guarding the High Seeker during the day shift, it was unlikely that any assassin would have the opportunity to murder Layle Smith during Mr. Smith's leisure hours. Not that there was any great chance of an assassination when the High Seeker was cloistered at home, Seward thought to himself as he stepped in and turned to bar the door. Two entrances led into the High Seeker's cell, but both doors had heavy bars. Almost never used now, those bars were remnants of the time when the High Torturer had been the least popular member of the dungeon and therefore was vulnerable to murder by his own torturers and guards.

These days, the problem was rather the reverse. Taking a deep breath, Seward turned to face the High Seeker.

Layle Smith – who had undoubtedly overheard every word spoken between his love-mate and his senior night guard – was currently pretending that nobody was in the room except himself. He sat hooded in an armchair, turning pages of a large book that appeared to contain – Seward saw as he passed by – plates of artwork showing scenes from the sacred dramas of Vovim.

Seward did not linger to see whether Mr. Smith was dwelling upon the depictions of Hell. He paused only to place Elsdon's gun within easy reach of the High Seeker; despite Layle Smith's famous aversion to machinery, Seward would have been very surprised indeed if Mr. Smith's knowledge of firearms did not surpass his own. Then he ducked into the bedroom.

There he checked carefully under the bed – the only piece of furniture in the cell that might have hidden a man – and looked to see whether anything unpleasant and deadly had been placed under the sheets and pillows, or inside any of the smaller objects in the room.

He passed back into the main room and gave the bookcase and desk and seats a careful perusal. The task came easily to him, though thirty years had passed since he had received his training as a young palace guard assigned to watch over the Queen's heirs. Having spent hours in the palace checking under rugs, inside chests that existed purely for show, and behind endless numbers of knick-knacks, he was thankful that Seekers' cells were starkly furnished and held few decorations. Not many minutes passed before he busied himself in the small kitchen at the end of the main room, sorting the food, with thoughts of throwing it in the dustbin. When he reached the tea canister, Mr. Smith said, without looking up, "Mr. Sobel."

"Sir?" Seward had been reading the canister label – which was of a respectable tea manufacturer in southern Yclau – and wondering whether the label or the canister's contents were to be trusted. He turned his gaze toward the High Seeker, whose back was to him.

"The tea was delivered by one of the Codifier's guards shortly after I arrived here this morning. All deliveries of food will be through the Codifier's office, for the time being. Pray do not disturb yourself with thoughts of poison."

Seward – whose mind had leapt ahead to the unlikely possibility of the Codifier's guards being bribed by the assassin – carefully set aside the tea. "Yes, sir." Then, stating the obvious: "It seems, sir, that I am to be your shadow again."

Layle Smith turned a page. "In certain ways, Mr. Sobel, you have never ceased to be." He turned another page. "There are worse fates for a man of my past to endure."

No reply could be made to such a remark. Seating himself on a stool in the kitchen, where he could immediately sight any intruders into the cell but they would not immediately see him, Seward settled down for a long, uneasy watch.

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High Seeker's guard: Traditional, unofficial title for the senior night guard of the High Seeker. *See also:* Tyrant (epithet).

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

On Guard 3
SEARCHING

Barrett Boyd
The year 360, the seventh month.

Historians of Yclau's labor movement divide the movement into two periods: the "elite" period, when guilds were confined to artisans and other mid-class clients of aristocrats, at which time the guilds sought to preserve past traditions, and the "commoner" period, when labor power transferred into the hands of progressive-minded lower-class laborers – the most important of these guilds being of course the Commoners' Guild, founded in 359.

It has often been suggested, by careless historians who ought to know better, that the Eternal Dungeon was so violently touched by this revolution because its members belonged to the Guild of Prison Workers, one of the traditional-minded "elite" guilds. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The torturers and guards of Yclau's royal dungeon, being under the control of the Queen, were forbidden from joining any sort of guild. The basic social structure of the Eternal Dungeon was founded, not on guild principles, but on the principles of military structure. The High Seeker – as the head torturer came to be called – was conceived as

being commander of an "army" of torturers and guards who could be "court-martialled" for disobedience to orders.

Once we understand that, much that appears murky about the events of 360 becomes immediately clear. Most of the senior Seekers and senior guards may have thought of themselves – if they thought about their place at all – as being akin to members of the elite guilds, preserving the past. But the junior Seekers and junior guards did not: they identified themselves with the disenfranchised commoners, forbidden from having any say in how the dungeon was run.

It was perhaps inevitable that such a situation would give rise to unrest. All that was needed, it seems, was for a handful of prison workers to begin to doubt the foundational principles of their work . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon

CHAPTER SIX

The training session was not held in its usual place, the entry hall. The Queen, in an apparent effort to convince the world that the Eternal Dungeon was up to date, had unexpectedly ordered renovations made to the dungeon. The entry hall was consequently crowded with laborers dragging in equipment and furnishings and boxes. As a result of this institutional chaos, the junior guards' training had been moved to a quieter spot.

Pausing at the doorway to the Seekers' common room, Barrett Boyd looked around for someone to sit next to. He could see at a glance that almost none of the other senior guards had accepted the High Seeker's invitation for them to attend the training. No doubt most were taking advantage of the extra free time they had been given, for Mr. Smith had ordered that, during this training period, the between-shifts dusk break be extended from two hours to three.

Barrett could see several day guards yawning into their fists, and he could not blame them. With a perverse adherence to tradition, the Eternal Dungeon maintained its centuries-old custom of determining shifts, not by where the hands stood on a clock, but by the daily leave-taking and homecoming of the dungeon's bats, which in turn was determined by the seasonally changing hours of sunset and sunrise. At this time of year, near midsummer, the day guards had a shift that was fully fourteen hours long, though in the winter their shift would accordingly narrow to six hours a day. Barrett was looking forward to the shorter hours he would enjoy as a night guard on summer duty, although he had heard that the night guards' long winter shifts came close to driving men mad. The High Seeker had rejected a petition a few years back to equalize the hours of the night and day shifts year-round, although Barrett understood that the decision had been a close call. He found himself wondering whether the High Seeker would even consider such a petition again, now that matters had changed in the dungeon.

The High Seeker had at least possessed enough tact to extend the dusk break into the day shift rather than the night shift. Although the dusk shift had officially begun, the sun remained above the horizon. Sunlight still flooded this room, the only one in the dungeon to have a window. The

"window" consisted of a thick, semi-translucent stone in the ceiling that obscured sight of everything above except the occasional cloud shadow. Now the sky was cloudless, as Barrett knew from having spent the past week visiting his parents, who lived in the city surrounding the palace.

What with the upcoming training and his start at a new position, he had been aware that it was unlikely he would receive his usual monthly work break for some time, so he had asked and received permission to visit the lighted world in order to tell his parents of his change of position. He gathered that no other guards were being permitted to leave the dungeon during this tense period; the guards who did not already live in the outer dungeon had been crammed into whatever living space was available for them. He felt honored that Layle Smith apparently trusted him to hold his tongue during his visit to the city.

His visit had not been relaxing, though. His parents had grumbled without pause about the latest unrest caused by the Commoners' Guild and had appeared to blame him for the rise in crime in the city. "If those Seekers of yours didn't spend so much time arguing in courts that criminal commoners should be let free," his father had said, "we wouldn't have violent young men thronging our streets, causing trouble." And he had pointed at a newspaper photograph of the youthful founder of the Commoners' Guild, who had a deceptively mild expression on his face.

"So where shall we sit?"

Barrett was brought back to the present by Mr. Urman's cheerful question. He glanced over at the junior guard, who had evidently just come from the dining hall, for he was munching on carrots. He offered one to Barrett.

Barrett took it reluctantly. The last thing he wanted was to be forced to listen through the entire two hours to Mr. Urman's no doubt acid commentary on what was taking place, but given that he had just accepted a position that Mr. Urman had been vying for, he could hardly reject this friendly overture. He looked again at the guards sitting on the benches; with relief, he caught sight of a senior guard standing near the front, next to the wall. "Let's ask Mr. Sobel where he plans to sit," he replied.

Mr. Urman shrugged, but followed Barrett as he squeezed his way through the crowd. The tables and chairs that normally littered the room had been

removed, replaced by benches brought in from the entry hall. They had been placed in neat, orderly lines, as though the guards were schoolboys. There was even a schoolmasters' stand near the front of the common room, Barrett noticed as they came closer to that area. Mr. Smith was leaning against the solid stand of wood as he spoke with a Seeker whose back was turned, so that Barrett could not immediately recognize who the man was.

The benches were filling fast. Some of the younger guards, recognizing that there would be a shortage of seats, had begun to line up against the walls. Barrett squeezed his way past them with murmured apologies. Mr. Urman squeezed his way past them with rude comments about how much room they took up. It was hard to tell whether the comments were intended as jokes, and it was evident that several of the guards did not have the patience to enquire, for Barrett heard dark mutterings in the wake of their progress. Only the fact that Mr. Urman was now the High Seeker's junior night guard saved him from returned rudeness, Barrett guessed.

Not for the first time, Barrett reflected that working under a strong Seeker had its advantages for a guard, and he momentarily wondered whether he was making a mistake in transferring into service under Mr. Taylor. True, Elsdon Taylor was said to be creative in how he broke his prisoners, but he was also gentle and mild-mannered. Barrett frowned, and then shook his head clear of such thoughts as he reached Mr. Sobel, who was standing at the front of the crowd, along the wall to the right of the schoolmasters' stand.

The common room was rectangular and exceedingly plain in design, like all the rooms and cells in the Eternal Dungeon. The walls were white-washed cement blocks, broken only by the single door and by air ducts. A fat, iron stove in the middle of the room had a pipe leading up to the ceiling, but the stove was rarely used to heat the room. Near the door, lining one wall, was a bar counter; with seats short, several of the junior guards had seated themselves upon the counter.

The front half of the room was empty except for the sunlight and the schoolmasters' stand. Layle Smith had shifted his position so that his back was to the crowd; the Seeker he spoke with was now facing the guards. It was always difficult to recognize a Seeker from his eyes alone – that was part of the point of the hoods, after all – but Barrett had worked long

enough in the dungeon that he could tell that the other Seeker here was Mr. Ferris.

That was an interesting turn of events. Switching his attention to Mr. Sobel, Barrett saw that the older guard was not watching the High Seeker, as he was accustomed to do when the two men were in the same location, but instead was scanning with his eyes the crowded benches where the day and night guards sought to make room for newcomers.

"What are you doing here?" Barrett asked. "You must know everything that's going to be said in this place."

"I imagine that you do as well," Mr. Sobel replied. "We might learn something new."

He did not look Barrett's way as he spoke; his gaze was moving ceaselessly over the crowd.

Barrett turned his eyes. Very few seats were left now. "Where shall we sit?" he asked.

"I'm standing." Still Mr. Sobel did not move his gaze from the crowd, though his eyes had slowed, as though he were examining particular aspects of the scene before him.

Barrett was silent a moment before saying, "I'll join you."

He had forgotten all about Mr. Urman, standing behind him, and was only brought back to remembrance of the other guard's presence by Mr. Urman's loud sigh. "You two are idiots," the junior guard said. "If we stand here, the High Seeker is likely to make us demonstration models for whatever torture devices he plans to show off."

Barrett guessed that Mr. Urman was irritated at being ignored, but even so, a junior guard simply did not address two senior guards as idiots. Barrett waited to see how Mr. Sobel would respond to this breach of duty, but the older guard seemed too preoccupied to notice. Barrett decided that he would be too preoccupied to notice as well. After a couple of minutes, he looked round and saw that Mr. Urman had departed; the junior guard was now sitting on the back bench, glaring at nothing in particular.

Barrett felt a stab of guilt at his own rudeness, and then another stab of guilt at not having reprimanded Mr. Urman. As a senior guard, that was his duty as much as Mr. Sobel's, and Mr. Sobel was clearly too preoccupied at the moment to deal with a troublesome junior guard.

Under the light chatter of the waiting audience, Barrett murmured to Mr. Sobel, "Are you expecting trouble?"

"Not necessarily." Mr. Sobel's voice was equally quiet. Whether he would have said anything more, Barrett could not know, for at that moment, Mr. Sobel's attention suddenly snapped toward the back of the room.

Barrett followed his gaze. A man in laborers' clothing stood at the doorway to the common room. He was staring around the room, appearing to search for something. A couple of guards brushed past him in the doorway, ignoring him. Barrett glanced over at Mr. Sobel to see what he thought of this intruder.

Mr. Sobel was no longer standing next to him. He was directly in front of the schoolmasters' stand now, talking with Mr. Crofford, who, having already taken his seat at the foremost bench, looked somewhat overwhelmed at being singled out for conversation by the senior-most guard in the dungeon. Mr. Sobel nodded at something Mr. Crofford said as he slid his hands into his jacket pockets.

Barrett was amused. Guards did not rest their hands in their pockets, least of all well-trained guards like Mr. Sobel. Rarely did Mr. Sobel ever slip in his duties. It was a good thing Mr. Urman was not here to notice, Barrett thought, or Mr. Sobel would endure his ragging for months to come.

Barrett was about to turn his attention back to the laborer when he noticed something important, something he ought to have seen right away, for his own training should have ensured that he noticed such details.

Mr. Sobel was no longer carrying his whip.

Barrett's gaze flew to the High Seeker. Mr. Smith was standing in the same position as he had been before, with his back to the schoolmasters' stand as he spoke with Mr. Ferris. But as Barrett watched, Mr. Smith's arm snaked back to the stand, twisting in an improbably difficult position, and pulled

something off the stand. Mr. Ferris, who had been standing very still, nodded to whatever the High Seeker had said and stepped aside, well out of Mr. Smith's line of sight.

Not out of his line of sight, Barrett thought. Out of the line of fire.

All was clear now. A laborer, standing where he should not be, searching for someone. Mr. Sobel, blocking the High Seeker from the laborer's sight and placing his hand in his pocket. Mr. Smith, taking Mr. Sobel's whip. No Seeker ever touched a weapon, except when a life was at stake.

Barrett's heart was pounding so hard now that he found it difficult to breathe. The laborer must have a gun, he thought. If he did not, then there would be no reason for Mr. Sobel to try to hide the High Seeker's location. The guard would have moved forward by now to capture the laborer. Indeed, the High Seeker himself might have moved forward, using his deadly skill with the whip. Instead, both men were frozen, unable to take action.

Mr. Sobel had a handgun in his pocket; of that much, Barrett could be sure. By tradition, dungeon guards were not normally permitted to carry guns, since any shooting in the confined spaces of the Eternal Dungeon could easily result in the death of innocent bystanders. Whips and daggers were considered far safer weapons with which to subdue the unarmed prisoners. However, Mr. Sobel, as senior-most guard to the High Seeker, had a higher responsibility than other guards, and he had the appropriate training for the added responsibility.

But if Mr. Sobel started a gunfight in this crowd, there was too great a chance that someone besides the laborer would die. All that the guard could do was continue to block the laborer's line of fire and hope that, if anyone was shot, it was himself rather than the High Seeker.

Barrett did not know he had moved until he heard another guard complain loudly at having his feet trodden upon. Barrett paid no attention; his eyes were focussed on the laborer, whose gaze had narrowed as he continued to search the room. Nobody else had taken notice of him. He looked much like the laborers who were presently renovating the dungeon, and though the Seekers' common room was not being renovated, nobody would think

twice about the man's presence here. Which, Barrett thought bitterly, would be precisely why he chose those clothes.

He wasted no time in speculating as to the man's motives. All Seekers had enemies; it was in the nature of their work, which required them to obtain evidence that condemned men to death. This laborer – if he truly was a laborer – might be the brother or son of a former prisoner of the High Seeker, a prisoner whose ashes now lay in the crematorium. Mr. Sobel, most likely, had recognized the resemblance and drawn the proper conclusion in his quick-minded manner. What mattered was not why the laborer was trying to kill the High Seeker, but whether he would succeed.

As Barrett squirmed his way to the back of the room, he glanced at the crowd to see who, besides Mr. Sobel, was in the laborer's line of fire. As he did so, he noticed that Mr. Urman was now sitting on the edge of his bench, watching him expectantly. Barrett hesitated only momentarily; then he beckoned with his chin.

Mr. Urman promptly placed his dagger on his seat to mark his place and made his way over to Barrett. Barrett did not let himself worry about the loss of the blade; daggers would be of no use in this situation. He wasn't even sure a whip would be, though he was busy uncoiling the one he always carried at his left hip. A guard he was passing eyed him curiously, but did not quiz Barrett as to his purpose.

Neither did Mr. Urman when he arrived, for which Barrett was grateful. He simply followed Barrett's gaze over to the laborer and said in a low voice, "Shall I arrest him?"

Barrett shook his head. "He may be weaponed," he responded in an equally low voice. "I'm going to try to get him into the corridor. If I succeed, bolt the door behind us." He hesitated before adding, "Stand away from the door when you're done. He may have a gun."

Mr. Urman's eyes widened, but he simply nodded. Barrett felt a small measure of relief at that. There was a reason, he reminded himself, that Mr. Urman had kept his position as junior guard for five years. The younger guard had often shown himself to be competent when emergencies arose.

They had reached the area between the benches and the back wall now. The man standing under the door lintel still hadn't noticed them. His brow was puckered, either with puzzlement or anger. Barrett took a swift look toward the front of the room, but nothing had changed there. Mr. Sobel – several inches taller than the High Seeker and considerably more broad-shouldered – was still blocking the killer's view of the High Seeker. Mr. Smith remained motionless. Barrett turned his attention back to his own problem. He began to edge his way along the wall in which the door was set.

If he simply approached the gunman directly, the man would see him coming, and he would shoot Barrett. Guards were expected to make such a sacrifice if it was needed to save the life of a Seeker, but the assassin, if he panicked, might began firing randomly into the crowd – and he might be carrying a six-shot revolver. Six deaths would be five too many. Barrett needed to get the intruder back into the hallway, where it was more likely that, if anyone died, Barrett alone would be the victim.

The man was standing just a couple of inches outside the frame of the doorway. His head was turned away now to look toward the bar counter that the young guards were sitting upon. Barrett wondered whether he was considering using that as a place from which to make his shots. The thick counter would shield him from any answering gunfire.

The man took a step in the direction of the bar. Barrett, who already had his arm pulled back, flung his lash forward in the direction of the door.

Over the years, he had developed power in his arm from giving prisoners heavy beatings, and with any luck he would have sliced the man open with his whip. Luck was not with him. At the very moment he began to swing, the killer turned his head in the direction of Barrett. With quick reflexes, the man jerked his body back through the doorway, and the lash landed upon the doorway itself, jarring Barrett's arm.

He did not wait to see whether the killer would re-emerge through the doorway; nor did he look round to see the expressions of the onlookers, though he had noticed the sudden silence. He charged through the door. Mr. Urman, nearly as quick, had the door closed behind him, with the bar scraping into place, by the time Barrett skidded to a halt in the corridor.

He half expected to meet a bullet or a knife. But his lashing had apparently been more effective than he had thought; the killer had stumbled back several yards. Too many yards; he was out of range of Barrett's whip now. Barrett was still trying to figure out what to do next when the man began to fumble inside his jacket.

Three seconds was all that Barrett had in which to think. Thanks to his training, those three seconds were enough. He knew that if he ran straight forward, not deviating from his path, he would have time enough to come within whip range of the assassin, and he might be able to disarm the man with his whip.

But if Barrett should miss, and the man's pistol was powerful enough, the bullet would travel through him, and through the door, and through anyone close to that door. Mr. Urman or one of the other junior guards might die – perhaps even Mr. Sobel, if he had run forward to help.

Barrett did not hesitate. He flung himself against the left wall of the corridor, far enough down the corridor that any bullet that passed through him would enter, not the common room, but one of plumbing rooms. Nothing would die now except himself and perhaps a water pipe or two.

The man's hand emerged from the jacket. The hand was shaking. It held a white handkerchief, which the man dabbed against his face and neck, apparently soaking up the sweat there. "What – what did you do that for?" he asked in a plaintive voice.

There is nothing worse, Barrett reflected during the next few minutes, than to think yourself a principal player in a tragedy, only to discover that you are the buffoon in a farce. The fact that Mr. Sobel had made the same error offered no comfort. Barrett was the one who had made the attack; he was the one who the other guards would be ragging for weeks to come.

He heard the man out, and then hailed down a servant who was emerging with a push-cart from the shared living quarters of Mr. Chapman and Mistress Birdesmonde. She had just finished collecting the contents of the Seekers' chamber-pots, and so she readily agreed to escort the laborer to the outer dungeon.

"She'll explain to you how to travel to the dining hall without journeying past the Seekers' living cells," Barrett told the laborer. "You might want to inform your fellow workers of this path, so that they won't make the same error."

The High Seeker would have delivered such a statement in a dangerously dark voice, while fingering his whip. Fortunately, no such measure was needed here; the laborer's face was still pasty white after his terrifying encounter with a guard from the infamous Eternal Dungeon. His hands shook as the servant guided him away.

Barrett was shaking too, and the sweat on his skin was as slick as the lubricating oil of lovemaking liquid. He hoped the servant hadn't noticed. He spent a moment near the door to the common room, trying to steady his breath. It was hardly the first time he had risked his life for the sake of a Seeker or a prisoner or another guard, but always before he had been able to comfort himself with knowledge of a life saved. Now he simply felt stupid on top of his continued illness at the thought of what might have happened, had this been the tragedy he had imagined.

He rapped at the door – a coded rap, known by all guards. The bar scraped, and the door opened a crack. Mr. Urman cautiously looked past him, and then opened the door wide enough for Barrett to slide in.

The common room, he saw to his amazement, had changed little since he had left it. Junior guards and a handful of senior guards were chatting with one another lightly, as though they were used to having a guard use his whip in this room and charge out the door. A couple of guards sitting on the benches glanced over their shoulders and smirked at Barrett.

Barrett turned his attention back to Mr. Urman, who was assuming an expression of innocence. Barrett's eyes narrowed. "What did you tell them?"

Mr. Urman raised his eyebrows. When he spoke, it was in a voice loud enough to be heard by the smirking guards. "I told them the truth, of course – that I'd fooled you into thinking that a common laborer was a deadly assassin, intent on killing the High Seeker."

For a long moment, Barrett contemplated various manners in which he could employ the antique instruments of torture on the walls of the rack room. Then he allowed himself to chuckle. Mr. Urman grinned. He was well known for his practical jokes against fellow guards, and his story would be easily believed. Thanks to Mr. Urman's tale, Barrett decided, the ragging he would receive from the other guards would be marginally better than the jokes he would have had to endure if anyone had known the truth.

Mr. Urman glanced at the nearby guards, who had switched their attention back to their own conversations, since it was clear that Barrett would take Mr. Urman's joke with good grace. Turning back to Barrett, Mr. Urman asked in a low voice, "So what *did* happen?"

Barrett's smile turned wry. "I was fooled into thinking a common laborer was a deadly assassin." As Mr. Urman laughed, Barrett added, "He's helping to renovate the furnace in the corridor next to the Seekers' living cells. Thirsty work, so he asked where the Seekers drink their beer. Some fool directed him here."

Mr. Urman whistled. "If that fool was a guard, I'll wager his back will be bare to Mr. Sobel's whip by the end of the day."

"Yes." Barrett's mind wandered away from the conversation; matters of discipline were Mr. Sobel's concern, not his own. The High Seeker's senior-most guard, he noticed, had returned to his place against the wall, as though he had never left it. As for Mr. Smith, he was back in conversation with Mr. Ferris, leaning against the schoolmasters' stand with his body as relaxed as though he were directing the torture of a prisoner. He had probably enjoyed watching the attack, Barrett thought cynically.

"All the junior guards are here," said Mr. Urman. "I counted them while you were out there."

"Mm." Barrett fished his chain of keys out of his pocket and handed them to Mr. Urman. "Best lock the door, then. If any senior guards arrive late, they can use their keys to get in." His eye remained on Mr. Sobel, who still had not turned his gaze away from the crowd, despite the lack of danger. Barrett frowned.

"Lock it yourself." Mr. Urman thrust the keys back into his hand. "I'm not your maid."

By the time Barrett took notice of what Mr. Urman had said, the other guard was already returning to his seat – treading on several people's feet again in the process, judging from the muffled curses coming in that direction. Barrett hesitated. Disobeying the orders of a senior guard was a flogging matter; at the very least, he ought to reprimand Mr. Urman, to prevent his insolence from growing into a more serious case than it already was.

Barrett sighed as he turned to lock the door. He had had enough troubles already today; if the matter grew worse, no doubt Mr. Sobel would take action. Right now, Barrett just wanted to get through this training session and his subsequent duty shift so that he could return to his room and put his mind to leisure activities in an effort to forget his stupidity.

Mr. Sobel, as he might have anticipated, greeted his return with a discreet murmur of thanks for his assistance. Barrett glanced over at the High Seeker and discovered, with a jump of the heart, that Mr. Smith was watching him. For a moment, Mr. Smith held his gaze; then the High Seeker gave a brief nod, barely perceptible, before turning his attention to whatever it was he was reading upon his stand.

Barrett's heart thundered like hooves. The High Seeker was notorious for rarely offering commentary on the actions of the Seekers and guards who were under his care. If his men did poorly, they would be punished; if they did well, the High Seeker treated this as no more than what he would have expected of them. For Mr. Smith to have given a brief nod in acknowledgment of what Barrett had done was the equivalent of him handing out the Queen's commendation for outstanding service.

The mixture of fear and embarrassment Barrett had felt before drained away, leaving him with a more solid feeling, like a foundation block. Glancing over at Mr. Sobel, he saw that the other guard was watching him. In a low voice that did not carry to the other men standing near them, Barrett said, "Sometimes I remember why I became a guard here."

Mr. Sobel smiled but said nothing; he had returned to running his eye over the crowd, even though he must have noticed that Barrett had locked the

door against further intruders. Barrett looked over the men as well, the solid feeling increasing inside him. All these men, united in their love of the Code, were willing to sacrifice their lives if needed to uphold the Code. Sometimes he forgot that – sometimes he began to think of guard duty in the Eternal Dungeon as being like guard duty anywhere else. That simple acknowledgment by the High Seeker of what he had done was enough to remind him of what Mr. Urman had said the other day: The Eternal Dungeon was not like the lesser prisons. In the lesser prisons, he would have had praise heaped upon him for risking his life. Here his action was taken for granted. No man who would think twice about sacrificing himself to uphold the Code was permitted to work in the Eternal Dungeon.

"Gentlemen." The voice was the High Seeker's, cutting through the conversation as cleanly as a surgeon's knife parting flesh. There was immediate silence, other than a rustle as various guards settled firmly into their seats. Barrett turned his head in time to see Mr. Smith place a small, black, familiar volume onto the schoolmasters' stand.

"We will begin with the prayer for dedication to duty," the High Seeker said. "Mr. Crofford, will you be so kind as to guide the responses?"

Flushed with pleasure at receiving this privilege, Mr. Crofford hurried toward the stand as the High Seeker stepped back. Around the room, guards exchanged glances with guards. One junior guard who had served under Barrett a few years earlier caught his eye, but Barrett shook his head slightly. He had no more idea than the other men what Layle Smith had in mind. Though the *Code of Seeking* had always included prayers as a reminder of the essentially religious goals of the Seekers' work, those prayers were usually only recited at the daily service, at funerals, or in private devotions. He could not remember any time during his nine years as a guard in this dungeon that the High Seeker had required their recitation at a general meeting.

"O Immortal Ones, who have sacrificed renewal of life and who dwell in the death of immortality . . ."

Many of the guards were now inscribing circles of rebirth upon their foreheads with their thumbs. Barrett followed their example, reflecting to

himself that Mr. Smith could not have chosen a less cheerful prayer for recital. The Immortal Ones – the souls who had chosen to remain in afterdeath for eternity rather than be reborn into mortal life – were never a pleasant topic to dwell on. Why anyone would choose unchanging eternity rather than the sorrows and joys of life was a question that exercised theologians in every generation. Barrett could certainly think of no reason why Mr. Smith, with his patent thirst to bring prisoners to rebirth, should want to dwell on the prisoners who, refusing to acknowledge their faults, went to their deaths unrepentant and remained trapped in afterdeath.

". . . grant that, as once you gave the knife of death to the soul who was first reborn, so too we may have the courage to guide our prisoners into death. . . ." Mr. Crofford's voice wavered; he had been a guard long enough that those words were more than formality. The other guards quickly covered his hesitation by reciting tonelessly the response: "As we too shall be guided to our death, and may hope for our rebirth."

Barrett glanced over at the High Seeker. All around the room, men were making the sign of rebirth, and all around the room, men were either staring straight ahead, as a brave man stares unflinching at the death that will bring him to rebirth, or they were staring upward toward the world of afterdeath, no doubt hoping that their time there would be brief. The High Seeker, though, was staring at the ground, and his hands were flat at his side, as though he had never known the sign of rebirth.

Perhaps, Barrett thought, there was a simpler reason for Mr. Smith's choice of prayer: It was the only prayer in the Code that was addressed to other beings. Indeed, Yclau theologians were uncertain whether most of their queendom's prayers could properly be called prayers at all, while foreign theologians were often uncharitable enough to claim that the Yclau religion was no religion, since it did not include belief in the gods. No doubt, for a man like Layle Smith, who had been raised to believe in the existence of gods above and below, it was easier to choose a prayer which intimated that something other than mortal beings existed in the world.

". . . that once reborn, our prisoners may renew their lives, gaining strength from what they have suffered in the past . . ." Mr. Crofford's voice had grown more confident; he was still inexperienced enough a guard that he could speak the word "suffer" without full understanding of what that

meant. One session in the rack room, Barrett thought with a twist of the mouth, would be enough to make the younger guard question whether any renewal of life was worth the suffering experienced by some prisoners in the Eternal Dungeon. Barrett could not say that he had ever fully answered that question himself.

". . . that our own sacrifices may be used to bring healing to the prisoners here . . ."

Much more to the point; but Barrett's contemplation of the most beautiful image the *Code of Seeking* had to offer – the image of a torturer suffering for his prisoners – was interrupted by a squeak of the hinges.

A few guards in the back rows looked over their shoulders. Barrett stared too, wondering which senior guard was so brave – or so unwise – as to enter a room where the High Seeker had already begun a meeting.

No guard entered; it was a Seeker, too far away for Barrett to immediately identify him. Barrett glanced quickly at the High Seeker, but Mr. Smith was so absorbed in the prayer – or pretending to be absorbed – that he failed to take note of the late arrival.

Barrett looked back at the new arrival. He seemed in no hurry to dispose any of the guards of their seats, which puzzled Barrett a moment until the Seeker, glancing around the room, paused his search long enough to raise a hand of greeting at Barrett.

Ah. Barrett gave him a military salute, there being no regulation in the Code to guide a guard in how to greet his Seeker from across the room. At that moment, as Mr. Crofford was stumbling through the final words of the prayer – a dreadful promise of the eternal life that awaited any Seeker or guard who failed to obey the Code – Mr. Urman suddenly rose from his seat, causing a number of anguished yelps from his neighbors as he trod his way over their toes and hurried toward Barrett.

This left an open seat. Mr. Taylor engaged in a brief dispute with a senior guard over who should take precedence – each man encouraging the other to sit down – before he quietly claimed the seat, treading on no one's toes in the process. Barrett, following the gestures of the dispute, found himself frowning. Politeness in a Seeker he valued, of course, but he wanted a

Seeker who was capable of taking leadership. How much of the submission that Mr. Taylor was rumored to show in the bedroom with Layle Smith did he carry into the breaking cells? Was Barrett giving up a steady but unimaginative Seeker in place of a creative but weak one?

Mr. Urman had reached his side now. "Can't see a bloody thing back there," the junior guard grumbled as Mr. Crofford settled back into his seat. The guards around the room shifted minutely on the benches in the aftermath of the prayers.

"Half a day's pay for cursing on duty, Mr. Urman." Mr. Sobel's voice could barely be heard amidst the guards' whispers as the High Seeker stepped toward the stand. Mr. Sobel's eyes were fixed on the doorway, though he had surely seen Mr. Taylor relock it after he entered.

"You—" Mr. Urman wisely cut off the rest of his protest as Mr. Smith reached the stand and turned to look at the guards.

As was always the case, the High Seeker waited until the rustles and whispers had died down, and then waited a long moment more, until all eyes were upon him. Then he said, "You are a prisoner. You are being abused by your Seeker in a heinous fashion, in contradiction to the Code. Who is your protector?"

The guards exchanged looks. None, it seemed, were eager to voice their opinion and chance earning the High Seeker's scorn. Finally a junior guard said, "The healer, sir. He— That is, she must give approval to all torture that the prisoners undergo, and if she learns that the prisoner's body has been abused, she must report that fact to the Codifier."

"How would she know that a prisoner was being abused, if no one notified her of that fact?" Mr. Smith responded. "And what if the abuse was of mind, not of body? Come, gentlemen, your wits are better than that."

The guard who had responded flinched visibly at this reprimand. The High Seeker's tone had indeed been cutting; Barrett suspected that this had something to do with the pronoun "she" that Mr. Smith had been forced to voice. There was another, longer silence, as the High Seeker patiently waited, like a murderer in the shadows. Finally one of the braver junior guards said, "The Codifier, sir. He inspects the prisoners periodically."

"Better," said Mr. Smith, and then, waiting until the very moment that the guard emitted a sigh of relief, "but not good enough. The Codifier is only here during the daytime, and his inspections, as you say, are only periodic. What if the prisoner should be abused at night, or at some other time when the Codifier was unaware? For that matter, what is to save the Codifier from being in league with the Seeker? He has lived many years in this dungeon, after all, and no man can be said to be totally immune from corruption—"

"The magistrates, sir!" The junior guard who was sure he had the answer was so eager to speak that he overrode the end of Mr. Smith's sentence. "You said it at the meeting the other day: Prisoners can appeal to the magistrates, and if their appeal is ignored, they can offer their plea to the Queen, and even the Queen's ruling can be overturned if the people say—"

"And how," said the High Seeker, his voice now a knife flaying flesh, "is the prisoner to get word to the magistrates, much less to the Queen or her people? He is imprisoned; the Codifier is in conspiracy with the Seeker; the only other people who visit him are his guards. Gentlemen, *who is the prisoner's protector*?"

As one or two of the senior guards shook their heads at the younger men's inability to answer so obvious a question, Barrett carefully watched the junior guards, taking note of who the most courageous of the junior guards were. Those were the ones who were opening their mouths to reply.

Mr. Phelps finally said, with a voice that emerged in something hardly better than a hushed whisper, "The prisoner's senior-most guard?"

The High Seeker said nothing. He simply waited, his gaze fixed on the speaker.

Mr. Phelps, wilting somewhat, answered his own question. "No, it couldn't be him. He could be in league with the Seeker too."

"Indeed, since senior guards often work for many years alongside their Seekers," Mr. Smith replied. "Even in cases where the senior guard does not intend harm, his close alliance with the Seeker may blind him to abuses the Seeker commits." His gaze flicked, ever so quickly, toward Mr. Sobel, and then away again. He leaned forward against the stand.

"Gentlemen, there is not a man among you who should not know the answer to this question; it is written plainly in the *Code of Seeking*. . . . Mr. Crofford, you have been silent, and I suspect that is out of modesty, for I believe that you know the answer to this question, since you came close at one time to seeing this process put in place – though thankfully, your Seeker, who had intended no harm, reported himself to the Codifier. Who is the prisoner's protector, Mr. Crofford?"

"Myself, sir." Mr. Crofford's voice was quiet.

"Yes. Yourself." The High Seeker's raised his eyes, but he did not raise his voice, which had grown soft. "Gentlemen, the prisoner's greatest hope does not lie in the healer or the Codifier or the senior guards or even in myself. His greatest hope lies in you. You are the members of the inner dungeon who have dwelt here the shortest amount of time; you are most likely, out of all the members of the inner dungeon, to have the integrity to defy authority when the Code requires it to be defied. Mr. Phelps, with that matter clear in your mind, can you tell me what would happen if a prisoner under your care was abused by his Seeker?"

Mr. Phelps, who shared the looks of chagrin that had spread over the faces of most of the junior guards, said in a subdued manner, "I would report the matter directly to the Codifier, sir. If the Codifier failed to heed my warning, then my duty would require that I leave the dungeon and alert one of the Queen's magistrates."

"And the chances that a magistrate you chose at random was in league with the rest of us would be extremely small. Yes." The High Seeker raised his voice finally. "Gentlemen, you are the prisoner's shield. You are his greatest hope against abuse, assault, violation, oppression. You must . . . not . . . fail him."

Barrett glanced at Mr. Urman. There was no trace of his usual mockery or impatience in his expression. Everyone at the dungeon knew that Mr. Urman, like Mr. Crofford, had come close to being forced to exercise that power over his Seeker on one occasion, though in that case also, the Seeker who had committed the abuse – Layle Smith – had turned himself over to the Codifier for punishment.

Barrett could only imagine the sort of courage it would have taken to defy the High Seeker's wishes. Yet judging from Mr. Urman's expression, he had that courage.

Barrett found his gaze wandering over to Elsdon Taylor. He discovered that Mr. Taylor, whose line of sight did not permit him to look directly at Mr. Phelps, already had his head pointed in Barrett's expression. Barrett gave him a rueful smile. Despite what the High Seeker had said about the corruptibility of senior guards, Barrett knew that it was the duty of every guard here, from Mr. Sobel on down, to intervene if a prisoner was abused by his Seeker. It would be Barrett's duty, if Mr. Taylor unduly harmed his prisoner.

It seemed unlikely that would happen. True, Elsdon Taylor had originally arrived at the dungeon under arrest for a crime he had committed, but he had been barely eighteen at the time, and he had shown no tendencies in the five years since then toward violence or even due force. Frowning as he turned his attention back to the High Seeker, Barrett wondered again whether he had chosen a Seeker who was too gentle at his work.

"Some of you worked in the lesser prisons before you came here," Mr. Smith said, breaking into Barrett's thoughts. "The rest of you worked at other types of employment – or arrived here immediately after your school years." His head, perhaps not by coincidence, turned in the direction of Mr. Taylor at that moment. "Even those of you who have worked at other Yclau prisons, however, may not be aware of the extent to which the *Code of Seeking* has shaped the behavior of guards in the lesser prisons. Nobody who has worked only at Yclau prisons knows what it is like to be in a place of imprisonment where a code of ethics is entirely unknown."

"Bloody blades," muttered Mr. Urman, too low for his oath to reach Mr. Sobel's ears. "I don't want to hear what's coming next."

His sentiment matched Barrett's . . . and, to judge from the restlessness of the audience, everyone else's in the room. The Eternal Dungeon had managed to survive the news that their High Seeker was a former torturer of the Hidden Dungeon, only because Mr. Smith had been kind enough to spare them the details of what he had done there. Mr. Taylor, perhaps, knew what deeds Layle Smith had committed in the past; if nothing else,

the junior Seeker had been a prisoner in the Hidden Dungeon for a brief period. The rest of the Eternal Dungeon would sooner not know.

"Are there any questions at this point?"

Without warning, a smile appeared in the High Seeker's voice. Apparently he could guess quite well what his audience was dreading to hear and was amused by their response. Mr. Urman muttered something that sounded like, "Bloody sadist," but he kept his voice so quiet as to be indistinguishable this time.

Mr. Smith's voice returned to sobriety as he said, "Because of this, I have asked Mr. Ferris to speak to us here. He was arrested in Vovim thirty-seven years ago, shortly before the Intermittent Peace Accord, and spent time in a prison in east Vovim. Although you may find this hard to believe before his tale is over, east Vovimian prisons are the most advanced prisons of that kingdom, since they lie close to the Yclau border and have been influenced by conditions in this queendom. Prisoners in east Vovim are kept in relative warmth during the winter; their cells are fairly sanitary and vermin-free; the prisoners are permitted a period of exercise each day in order to keep up their strength. Other than the Hidden Dungeon under its recent High Master, you will find no prison in Vovim where prisoners are better treated than they are in prisons like the one Mr. Ferris was held captive in. Mr. Ferris's prison therefore represents the heights of civilization that can be achieved without the *Code of Seeking* or another ethical code like it. Mr. Ferris?" The High Seeker stepped back from the schoolmasters' stand.

Mr. Ferris came forward. He was a tall man, taller than the High Seeker, with hands that had the sunken skin and pronounced veins of age. His voice was vigorous, though, as he said, "The High Seeker and I don't see eye to eye on everything. I want you all to understand that. I think he's taken the wrong course of action in the present crisis. Seekers aren't meant to be puppets on a string, rigidly following every jot and tittle of the Code. To my mind, the Code's spirit is what is meant to guide us, and sometimes that means the letter of the Code must be broken. That's always been true in this dungeon, for as long as I can remember; the High Seeker is going against tradition by demanding that Seekers set aside their best judgment on how to handle particular prisoners. —Nonetheless," he added, cutting

into the whispers that had begun, "I think I understand better than anyone else here at the dungeon what he fears . . . with the possible exception of one other man." He nodded in the direction of Mr. Taylor.

Elsdon Taylor made no gesture in reply. He was sitting very quietly, not joining into the whispered discussions raging on either side of him. He was watching, not Mr. Ferris, but Mr. Smith.

"I'll be brief about this," said Mr. Ferris. "Your gorges would rise if I made it a lengthy tale. I was arrested in Vovim in the spring of 323, on charges of being a spy. I was not a soldier; I don't know whether my fate would have been better or worse than a soldier's would have been. I was simply a mid-class tradesman, visiting Vovim on a business matter at a time when the King there – the father of today's King – had promised that no foreign visitors would undergo molestation, despite the continued unrest between our two nations.

"I was rounded up, along with every other Yclau citizen in that town, and placed in the town's prison. This was in the years before Vovim's royal dungeon flitted from prison to prison, keeping its activities hidden from the public eye; ours was just an ordinary prison, no different than the rest. None of the guards there struck me as being in any way out of the ordinary, so I expected decent treatment. Perhaps I received it. My mistake was in thinking the decency would match Yclau standards.

"Some of the men and women and young folks had been wounded during their arrests. We asked for medical supplies to care for them. The guards laughed at us. They were not mocking us, I came to realize; they were simply unable to hold back their laughter at so absurd a request.

"We cared for the wounded as best we could. We were all in one cell, and our surroundings were not uncomfortable. Indeed, the pallets we were given to sleep on were far softer than those on the bed-shelves in the Eternal Dungeon, and certainly more comfortable than the straw-strewn floors that serve as beds in Yclau's lesser prisons. Once a day we were taken to a courtyard within the prison and allowed to walk in circles. We were given water and food, and our night buckets were removed daily. To that extent, it was as well-run a prison as I have ever visited.

"But that was the full degree of mercy we received. Guards entered our cells every few hours, sometimes to see whether our daily needs had been met, sometimes to beat a prisoner bloody. We never could be entirely sure which motive would bring a guard into our cell, though over time we learned to be wary of certain guards.

"Periodically, men and women and young folk were taken from our cells for questioning. We could tell from their screams how they were being questioned. When I asked a guard whether those prisoners would have the opportunity to defend themselves at their trials, he looked at me as though I were some strange, alien creature that had wandered up from the depths of the sea. Out of pity, I think, he carefully explained matters to me: There would be no trials. The prisoners would be questioned under torture until they confessed to their crimes, and then they would be executed.

"I asked him whether there were no alternatives for any of us prisoners. He looked me up and down and said, Yes, an alternative existed, but he doubted I would like it.

"The next day – perhaps by chance, perhaps not – a group of guards came into our cell and began choosing the prisoners they wanted to serve them in their beds. Mainly it was the young that were chosen: youths and maidens. The guard I had spoken to on the previous day chose me.

"I allowed him to take me."

Mr. Ferris paused at this point. The whispering had stopped, but a number of the guards were now exchanging looks with one another. When it became apparent that nobody was prepared to speak, Mr. Ferris continued.

"Perhaps I might have done otherwise if the guard had not phrased his order in such a manner as to make clear that he was offering me a choice. He was a man of honor, after his own fashion; he was not a rapist by nature. He was offering me his protection, under the conditions that this prison's tradition permitted. I suspected – and as it turned out, I was right – that the only prisoners left alive at the end of all this would be those who had served the guards in their beds. So I entered into his service."

Mr. Ferris shrugged. His voice was phlegmatic as he said, "I have undergone worse tasks in my life. His needs were simple. He had a certain

wariness about him that I eventually realized came from the fact that, in Vovim, to ask another man to sleep with you is a killing matter. He was a man who desired other men; short of taking up a life of crime, this was the only fashion in which he could satisfy his desires. Nonetheless, he felt ashamed of himself for what he required of his prisoners.

"Once I had learned that, matters went better between us. I was able to assure him that – having visited nations where such acts were lawful – I had slept with men since my coming of age and did not consider the mere act of sleeping with another man to be a stain upon my honor. Though surprised by this, he took this as his cue to make me his confidant. He was unhappy with the way in which matters were run in the prison, he told me, but he did not know of any alternative. As far as he knew, every prison in the world was run like this one.

"From him, and through my own eyes, I witnessed what it means to be a prisoner in Vovim. His restraint with me was as much a part of the pattern as the harshness I had experienced from other guards. I realized this after a new lot of prisoners arrived two months later. These were Vovimian prisoners, men who had truly committed crimes, judging from their behavior. They bullied the other prisoners, or beat them, or raped them. Most of the stronger Yclau men had been executed by now or had died under torture; there weren't enough of us left to protect the weaker prisoners.

"Some of the guards, such as my own, would stop the Vovimian prisoners' cruelty when they witnessed it; other would not. It was all haphazard, a matter of each guard's whim. One guard might like to beat prisoners, the next one might dislike such an act, but neither of them had any guide directing their behavior. The guard who enjoyed beating prisoners would beat a frail old man; the guard who disliked beating prisoners would stand back and watch as one prisoner preyed on the other.

"It was anarchy. It was a world without law or order. It was hell."

The silence in the room was now absolute. Even Mr. Urman did not seem inclined to make commentary. Finally one of the senior guards, braver than the others, said, "You were released, sir?"

Mr. Ferris nodded. "After four months, as part of the terms of the Intermittent Peace Accord. I returned to Yclau, determined to learn whether my guard had been right in believing that all other prisons in the world were run as his was. I simply could not put what had happened behind me, much as I would have liked to have escaped from my memories.

"With the assistance of a cousin of mine who had connections within the Queen's government, I received permission to inspect our queendom's places of imprisonment. The first few Yclau prisons I visited were bad. Very bad. And yet they were not as bad as they could have been, given that the prisons had no code of behavior to govern their guards. I kept hunting around, trying to determine what was creating greater order in these prisons than in the Vovimian prison.

"Finally, at one prison, I managed to trace a source: a guard who seemed to be following some invisible pattern that elevated his behavior above that of the other guards. When I asked the keeper why this guard was so different from the rest, he laughed. 'He spent a year working in the Eternal Dungeon,' the keeper replied. 'Ever since he got back, he's been spreading around his fool notions of how to run a prison. If you're interested in prison management, you ought to visit the royal dungeon,' he added. 'They do everything there topsy-turvy.'"

Mr. Ferris held the silence in his grasp for a minute, and then said quietly, "Three years later, I was hooded."

There was a collective sigh, as though everyone in the room had been holding their breath. One of the junior guards, apparently dissatisfied with this abrupt end to the tale, asked, "Sir, do you know what happened to the guard at the Vovimian prison, the one who cared for you?"

"Ah," said Mr. Ferris, his voice suddenly light. "Now, that is an interesting sequel indeed. At the time that I became Seeker, I sent my former guard a letter. He was not a torturer, you understand, and so he lived in the town near his prison rather than within the prison itself; I thought it was safe enough for me to correspond with him. With the letter, I sent him a copy of the public edition of the *Code of Seeking* and urged him to read it. I received no reply – perhaps he considered it too dangerous to send a letter

to Yclau's royal dungeon – and so I set the matter aside in my mind. That was all I knew for many years. It was from another man that I learned the ending to that part of my tale." His head turned in the direction of the High Seeker as he stepped back from the schoolmasters' stand.

Mr. Smith came forward, but slowly, as though reluctant to add to the tale. When finally he spoke, his voice was so low that the guards in the back row leaned forward to hear him.

"Not long after I turned eighteen, the Hidden Dungeon shifted from its previous location to a prison located in a rural town in east Vovim," Mr. Smith said. "I was still under the age of manhood by Vovimian standards, and so I still received solicitations from men around me – though not from the workers of the Hidden Dungeon, who had grown to distrust me.

"At this prison was a guard who had worked there for many years. He was rumored to confine his bed-partners to full-grown men, but I must have seemed more mature to him than the average youth, for he made clear his interest in me. I let him think that the interest was shared, in order to learn what I could obtain from him before I set him aside.

"As it happened, I had been trying for some time to get my hands on a copy of the *Code of Seeking* – I had heard rumors that made me mildly curious about the Code. When the guard learned of my interest, he brought to the prison a copy of the Code that he had owned for many years." The High Seeker paused.

The junior guard, not quite knowledgeable enough to know the dangers of prompting the High Seeker, said, "He loaned you the book, sir?"

"No, I had him arrested." Mr. Smith's voice was level. "He was delivered to me for questioning, so that I could check whether he was running a black market in such unlawful material."

Several of the guards glared at the junior guard, who had shrunk back in his seat. Mr. Urman's lips twisted into a small smile; he was apparently amused by the dark humor of this turn of events. Even Mr. Sobel seemed to have lost interest in scanning the audience, though no surprise showed on his face.

Mr. Smith said, "Fortunately for my prisoner, the Code was delivered to me as well, in case I should need it in my questioning. I read it during my leisure hours, mainly out of boredom, because my prisoner was turning out to be far too easy to break. Even raping him while he hung from the hook proved uninteres—"

He stopped abruptly. Mr. Barrett was not sure what sign had warned the High Seeker to do so, though his own stomach had begun to sicken. After a moment, Mr. Smith said, even quieter than before, "Forgive me, gentlemen. I had not meant to supply the unpleasant details of what occurred. I simply want you to understand: I did not read the Code out of any great interest in its subject matter, nor out of any belief that it held truths I could learn from, despite the fact that my prisoner had told me that he had not taken any prisoners to his bed since the time he first read that the *Code of Seeking* forbade this. He had sought other, less conventional ways to assist the prisoners – a remarkable change in his behavior. As for myself, I did not expect my own views on the proper manner of handling prisoners to change in any way."

He paused, his head turned in the direction of Mr. Taylor. Looking back, Mr. Barrett saw that Mr. Taylor was staring straight at the High Seeker, as though this recounting held special significance for them both. After a moment more, Mr. Smith broke his gaze and said, "Yet after three days, I made the decision to release my prisoner. I arranged for him to work as a guard at a prison in southern Vovim, a province which holds to certain ancient customs that permit men to sleep with other men. I thought my prisoner would be happier there than where I planned to go."

The silence was unbroken this time. Barrett finally decided that it was his turn to step back into danger. "The Eternal Dungeon, sir?"

The High Seeker glanced his way. "The Eternal Dungeon. Yes." He returned his attention to the audience. "That is the tale of two Vovimian prison-workers who had their lives changed by adopting the Code as their guide, and whose prisoners had their lives changed thereby. I believe I know of a third case of this sort. Mr. Taylor, as all of you know, was held in the Hidden Dungeon for a short spell. His torturer delayed executing him, a delay that permitted Mr. Taylor to be rescued. Although the reasons for that delay are complex, Mr. Taylor has suggested, and I concur, that the

delay may be partially due to the fact that his torturer had received access to the Code. Mr. Taylor, who would have died an unjust death, therefore owes his life to the Code."

The High Seeker leaned forward, resting his arms on the schoolmasters' stand. "This is what lies at stake in the present crisis, gentlemen. Not merely our reputations, which are of little importance, but the lives and souls of our prisoners, and the lives and souls of thousands of prisoners in Vovim. If we are to help them, we cannot shrink from the hard task of adhering to the Code. We *must* remain unified against nations who pressure us to alter the Code."

His voice had taken on a passion that Barrett had rarely heard in the High Seeker. For a moment, everyone in the room hung upon that passion, swaying forward as though they were all souls held in the palm of Layle Smith's hand. Then Mr. Smith straightened. He said in his normal, level voice, "Are there any questions?"

Barrett looked around. Everyone appeared stunned, like Vovimian play-goers after a particularly powerful performance. Nobody seemed to want to serve as the anti-climax to that speech.

Except one man. He had his hands clasped together over his head, in the universal sign of a pupil petitioning his schoolmaster for the right to speak.

"Are there no questions?" asked Mr. Smith, moving his head to and fro.

"I have a question, High Seeker," insisted the petitioner, lowering his arms.

"You may address your question to me in private, Mr. Taylor," the High Seeker responded, not even looking in the junior Seeker's direction. "This instruction is intended for guards."

"You said that anyone might attend, sir."

"Mr. Taylor" – and now there was a significant chill to the High Seeker's voice – "Seekers are given formal instruction in all matters related to the Code. If you failed to pay attention to the instruction you were given, this is not the appropriate venue at which to correct the deficiencies in your education."

Mr. Crofford sucked in his breath audibly. Even Mr. Sobel winced. Barrett could envision the blood draining from Mr. Taylor's face.

But he was wrong. In a voice as level as the High Seeker's had been, Elsdon Taylor said, "I fear, sir, that the deficiencies in my education are due to the fact that I was switched between instructors during my time as a Seeker-in-Training. Since this inevitably resulted in certain gaps in my education, I was hoping that you could fill them."

This time there was a collective gasp from the audience. Barrett stared at Mr. Taylor, unable to believe that the young Seeker had spoken those words deliberately. Surely it had simply been a slip on Mr. Taylor's part to draw public attention to the fact that Layle Smith had been unable to tutor Mr. Taylor for the first six months of his training, due to the fact that the High Seeker had been suspended from his duties for attacking a prisoner.

Barrett was unable to read any emotion in Mr. Smith's voice when he spoke again. "What is your question, Mr. Taylor?"

"It is concerning the *Code of Seeking* that you and Mr. Ferris's guard were transformed by reading. That would have been the previous edition of the Code, the fourth revision?"

"Since I had not yet been assigned to revise the Code, my introduction to the Code was indeed through the fourth revision." Mr. Smith's response was dry. Several of the younger guards tittered.

If anything, though, Mr. Taylor seemed more determined than before to pursue his thought. "Then, if you were willing to revise the Code, you must have noticed certain flaws in it?"

The tittering stopped. Mr. Smith paused before saying, "Mr. Taylor, you know as well as anyone else here that the Code is revised once in every generation, in order to incorporate new insights. I believe that you have been in touch in the past with the Codifier concerning certain suggestions for revision; those will be taken under consideration at the time of the next revision. The Codifier and I always welcome suggestions for bringing the Code up to date. That is a very different matter from deliberately transgressing the current Code—"

"But sir, isn't part of the process of revision gained from knowledge provided by experimental testings of new methods of questioning by Seekers, prior to the revision?"

"Mr. Taylor." The High Seeker's voice was now as hard as a breaking cell's bed-shelf. "If this is your circumlocutory manner of asking whether you might have permission to undertake experimental testing, let me remind you, please, that such experiments may only occur with permission of the High Seeker, and that I only grant such permission to senior Seekers—"

"But sir, isn't it true that sections 18, 23, 51, and 72 of the Code – which have been much praised for their effectiveness in transforming prisoners – were introduced to the fifth revision due to certain experiments in new forms of questioning that were undertaken in 338?" Mr. Taylor's voice was as bland as unsweetened porridge. "And isn't it true, sir, that the man who undertook those experiments was a Torturer-in-Training? And isn't it true that he experimented without prior permission of this dungeon's High Torturer, and that there was some question at the time as to whether the Torturer-in-Training should be placed under discipline or dismissed from the dungeon altogether?"

The room had gone completely silent again. Even the many guards who had not been here in 338 knew the date of Layle Smith's arrival at the Eternal Dungeon.

For a minute, it appeared that the High Seeker would make no response. Then he said in a very soft voice, "Mr. Taylor, these matters are somewhat advanced for this class. I will address your questions later. Gentlemen, I believe that our time is complete. You may go to your duties or may enter into your leisure hours, as is applicable." The High Seeker turned away from the schoolmasters' stand.

Barrett lost sight of him in the next moment as everyone in the room stood up and began talking in loud voices about what had happened. Mr. Sobel murmured something and slipped away in the direction of his Seeker. Standing on his toes, Barrett just managed to catch sight of Elsdon Taylor, walking toward the door in a seemingly calm and collected manner.

Barrett turned in consternation to Mr. Urman, who had been watching him. "Is that what he's like in a breaking cell?" he demanded to the junior

guard.

Mr. Urman grinned. Slapping Barrett on the back, he said, "Enjoy your new job, mate."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Thirty-six people have submitted affidavits testifying to the purity of his character," Elsdon Taylor said.

Barrett gave a low whistle. "That many?" He glanced over at his Seeker, who was perusing a slim volume containing the prisoner's records as they walked slowly down the deserted corridor. Barrett raised the electric lantern higher so that Mr. Taylor could easily read the words that had been carefully typed by a clerk at one of the lesser prisons.

They were strolling together through the only truly private corridor in the Eternal Dungeon, namely the narrow hallway that led behind the prisoners' western cells. At the northern end of the corridor lay the area near the rack rooms. At the southern end of the corridor lay the guardroom, next to the entry hall. In past days, he and Mr. Taylor would have had to time their visit carefully to avoid meeting the stokers who fed the furnaces behind the western cells of the dungeon, but now the furnaces lay abandoned, and the cells in front of them had been emptied to allow laborers to install ducts for the new central heating system. Barrett could hear the laborers clanking away and cheerfully chatting with one another. He also thought he could hear faintly one laborer describing what terrible, awesome creatures the Eternal Dungeon's guards were.

Barrett smiled. His common-room encounter with the laborer, he decided, would allow the laborer to spend the rest of his days boasting of his hair-raising adventure in this dungeon. If nothing else, Barrett had brought a little pleasure into the man's life.

Mr. Taylor nodded as he turned a page. "Affidavits have been received from Cornelius Rosero-Black, Secretary to the Queen; Henry Lloyd Argyll, Tutor to the Princesses; Edward, Duke of White Oak Landing . . ."

"By all that is sacred!" Barrett was startled into the only oath that was mild enough for him to speak while on duty. "I thought you said our prisoner was a commoner?"

Mr. Taylor nodded again, his expression hidden by the hood that fell to his shoulders. "A commoner, but a scholar of some renown. He began as a scullery boy in the household of William, Earl of Hartgrove, over sixty

years ago. Rather than use his leisure hours for relaxation, he used to sneak into a cubbyhole outside the schoolroom of the Earl's children and eavesdrop on their lessons. He saved his pennies and bought the same lesson-books they used, and thereby taught himself to read. By the time he was twenty-one, he had become so skilled at imitating the style of the books he read that, when he wrote letters to famous scholars, asking them questions about their work, they assumed that they were corresponding with a man of leisure and learning, and so they responded freely to his questions."

"And he was receiving their letters back?" Barrett said, trying to imagine this scene. He himself had an elite accent, learned from his mother, who was high-born, but his mother's family had disowned her when she eloped in order to marry below herself. As a result, Barrett had been raised in the mid-class, and his family had only possessed a couple of servants, but he could well imagine how his father would have reacted if he had discovered one of his servants corresponding with his betters.

Mr. Taylor nodded again. "Which was how his correspondence was uncovered finally. There was a confrontation between him and the Earl, which reputedly consisted of the Earl bringing all the fire of his fury upon a meek young man. At any rate, something of a scandal arose from the encounter, because the Earl left the young man half dead in the street. This being the age when the concept of noblesse oblige still held strong in our queendom, many people spoke of their outrage as to the Earl's actions, particularly the men with whom the Earl's servant had been corresponding. Nobody believed the Earl when he said that this meek young servant had tried to use the Earl's own ceremonial sword against him, and even the Earl admitted that the servant had not sought to defend himself until the Earl had slammed him head-first against the wall.

"The young man was healed in a hospital for paupers. His patrons – for that was what his correspondents now became – set him up in a mid-class cottage, stocked with a good library, where he could continue his studies. He did not leave the house thereafter."

It took Barrett a minute to grasp what his Seeker had said. "For fifty-two years? Surely not!"

"So the reports say." Elsdon Taylor turned a page, his face still hidden. "He permitted no visitors either. For the first twenty or so years, the only person who spoke to him face-to-face was a maid who came in once a week to bring him supplies and to remove any items that needed to be removed. When she died of old age, her daughter took her place, and he ended up marrying her after about a decade. His wife insisted on caring for him herself, without bringing in a new servant. Neighbors report having glimpsed him occasionally in his back garden, talking with his wife. By all accounts, he has remained meek and gentle, sweetly affectionate to his wife. He has written a number of books on the virtuous life, which have been well received by readers, especially one in which he deplored the dishonesty he had shown to the Earl of Hartgrove in his childhood, and in which he publicly asked the Earl's forgiveness." Elsdon Taylor turned over several pages at once. "The Earl's son has entered an affidavit of character witness for the prisoner. He believes that Mr. Holloway was sincere in his apology and that his books reflect his true character, which is not that of an attempted murderer."

"And the Earl's son was the victim of the attack."

"Yes, which is why Mr. Holloway has ended up in the Eternal Dungeon." Elsdon Taylor's voice had turned dry. He had been of the elite, Barrett knew, even before he obtained the high-titled position of Queen's Seeker, but he was said to have no patience with the system of received privileges which ensured that commoners accused of relatively minor crimes, such as failed murders, occasionally had death-sentence charges placed against them.

"Still," said Barrett, "if the crime took place in the manner that is said . . ."

"A stabbing in the back, late at night, with no apparent provocation. Yes. It was a serious crime indeed, and the city patrol soldiers have been carefully investigating whether the Earl's son – who is now the Earl of Hartgrove himself – might have done something to provoke the crime. So far they have turned up no evidence that the younger Earl has any serious enemies, nor any evidence that the Earl has entered into the prisoner's life for the past quarter of a century. At the time that the younger Earl gained his title, he sent a letter to the prisoner, apologizing for his father's ill treatment and offering to compensate the prisoner for the injuries he had received. The

prisoner politely declined, saying that he had only pleasant memories of the younger Earl's treatment of him. That was the end of all contact between them, as far as anyone can tell."

Barrett frowned. They had slowed their pace gradually, until they were now standing motionless, three-quarters of the way down the corridor. At the northern end of the corridor, from which they had come, dim light shone from the short hallway that led back to the main corridor of the inner dungeon. Faint sounds of conversation emerged from that end. Ahead of them lay only darkness and silence.

"Who reported the prisoner as having tried to kill the Earl?" Barrett asked.

"The local prison received a note, hand-delivered by a commoner woman whose appearance, alas, was not noted. That prison's soldiers, who were the initial investigators of the crime, suspect that the note was delivered by the prisoner's wife, but she vigorously denies having written any note to the soldiers, saying she knows that her husband is innocent of any misdeed. At any rate, when the soldiers entered the prisoner's house, they found what the note told them they would find: in the prisoner's wardrobe was one of his own shirts, embroidered with green lions and covered with blood. Hidden within the shirt's folds was a knife – the same meat-knife from the Earl's dinner-set that was used against the Earl in the attempt on his life."

Barrett shook his head. "It could have been planted there by an enemy."

"Certainly, which is why the soldiers were initially skeptical that their meek prisoner was the true culprit. Unfortunately, when the Earl's servants were closely questioned, it was found that a man of Mr. Holloway's description, wearing a shirt embroidered with green lions, had entered the Earl's house on the night of the attack, claiming that he was making a delivery. Many of the servants testified to meeting this man, and when they were shown a sketch of Mr. Holloway, they agreed that he was the man. All of them seemed surprised when told who the delivery man had been; the servants who had worked with the Earl's father during Mr. Holloway's time in service had all since died or retired. None of the current servants appeared to have any personal grievance against the

prisoner; indeed, many had heard of his tale and expressed regret that their testimony placed him at the scene of the crime."

"The shirt . . ." Barrett said.

"Was hand-made by the prisoner's wife, and was presented to him on his last birthday. He had not yet worn it into the garden, and as nobody ever entered his home, only his wife could have known of it."

Barrett sighed. "It sounds as though either the prisoner committed the murder, or his wife made it seem that way for her own purposes."

"Which is why she is presently being held in custody at the women's prison within this city. And which is why we have been left with the unpleasant task of determining whether this meek, kind man who is loved by many for his writings on virtue has committed an attack – and if so, for what reason."

Barrett licked his lips as he began to walk forward with Elsdon Taylor again. This was not the first time that a Seeker had consulted with him before searching a prisoner; Weldon Chapman had been accustomed to doing the same. Barrett always felt inadequate on such occasions. He had not become a guard because he possessed a Seeker's skills to ferret out the truth about crimes; he had become a guard because he was able to keep violent men under control while using a minimum of violence himself. That was a quality much honored in the Eternal Dungeon, and he wished that his Seekers would let him play his chosen role rather than continually drag him into attempting to do tasks for which they were better suited than he.

Finally Barrett asked, "Did the soldiers find anything else unusual in the prisoner's house?"

"No knives."

Barrett gave a startled glance at Mr. Taylor, moving the lantern upwards to try to see his eyes. "Sir?"

"The prisoner's house had no serving knives, no table knives – nothing that could be used for stabbing or slicing. When questioned, the prisoner said that, while his severe injuries at the time had wiped away all memory of

his encounter with his former employer, he took seriously the elder Earl's accusation that he had tried to stab the man with a sword. Therefore he had divested his house of any stabbing instruments, so as not to permit himself any such temptations if he should ever quarrel with his maids, or later with his wife."

"Oh, dear," Barrett said.

"Yes, he's far too honest," said Mr. Taylor, with his usual uncanny ability of reading into the thoughts of the person he was talking to. "Though he has not confessed to the crime, he has provided the soldiers with all sorts of superficial evidence that has led them to believe that he committed it. He ought to have had a legal counsellor by his side, who would have advised him to remain quiet. As it is, it will be very hard indeed for me to prove that he is innocent, unless we can determine the true culprit."

Barrett nodded. One of the paradoxes of the Eternal Dungeon was that the Seekers, after doing their best to extract evidence of their prisoners' guilt, were then require by their duty to argue in court that the prisoners were either innocent or deserved only light punishment. Barrett had never been able to figure out how Seekers managed this miraculous transformation from accuser to defender.

Mr. Taylor sighed suddenly as they started to walk forward again. "This is the most frustrating case I've come across in a long time. It might take as long to work out as that of my first prisoner."

Barrett winced. The Eternal Dungeon was quite small, as prisons went, and it was one of the only prisons in the queendom that was permitted to house men and women accused of the most serious death-sentence crimes. As a result, there was quiet pressure on every Seeker to break his prisoner as quickly as possible. If the prisoner was not determined guilty or innocent within a week, the Seeker would begin to receive enquiries from the dungeon's Record-keeper as to how matters were proceeding. If another week passed without change, the Seeker and his guards would be called into the High Seeker's office to explain their delay. It was rare for any prisoner in the Eternal Dungeon to remain silent as to his guilt or innocence longer than three weeks.

Elsdon Taylor had broken his first prisoner in the space of five months. Only the High Seeker's illness during that time had allowed him to get away with such a slow breaking, and Mr. Taylor had later received an official reprimand for his delay. The reprimand had not changed matters much. Mr. Taylor remained the slowest Seeker in the dungeon, determined not to overlook any clues as to extenuating circumstances or to his prisoner's possible innocence – understandable, since he himself had once been a prisoner, but this meant that he and his guards were continually being questioned and reprimanded by the High Seeker. If Mr. Taylor's rate of success as a Seeker had not been so high, it was likely that he would have been stripped of his hood long ago. As it was, the Record-keeper took care these days to assign him only prisoners who could be reasonably expected to hold out for long periods under any Seeker.

Five months, though . . . "I'm not sure, sir," said Barrett carefully, "that this is the right moment at which to test the High Seeker's temper."

He could hear the smile in Mr. Taylor's voice as the junior Seeker replied, "There is never a right moment at which to test the High Seeker's temper, Mr. Boyd – particularly not when one shares a living cell with Layle Smith. But I took an oath to suffer for the prisoners, and I don't regard that oath lightly." He gestured toward the door they had just reached, leading to the guardroom.

"I took no oath," Barrett muttered, envisioning an upcoming reprimand from the High Seeker, but he kept his comment too low for Mr. Taylor to hear. His friends had warned him of the disadvantages of becoming Elsdon Taylor's guard, so he could not claim to have been ignorant of what sort of role he was entering into. Fumbling one-handed with his key as he held the lantern near the door lock, he managed to push the door open for Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor stepped through the doorway, then stopped abruptly. Following in behind him, still blinking at the bright light, Barrett was just in time to see Mr. Sobel's lash land full upon the naked back of a Seeker.

The Seeker grunted as the lash's force drove his body against the thick whipping post that his arms were bound around. His hooded head was turned away, making recognition difficult. Barrett, taking in the situation

at a glance, quickly turned to lock and bar the door, so that no other guard or Seeker would make the mistake that he and Mr. Taylor had just made.

As he turned back, he saw the High Seeker gesture impatiently at them from his position on the other side of the punished Seeker, watching the man's eyes during the beating, as the Code required. Mr. Taylor turned and made his way silently to the sliding door of the guardroom that was only closed when this portion of the room was used for punishment. It was the most private place in the dungeon for punishment, since punished Seekers or guards could be brought in through the little-used passage that Barrett and Mr. Taylor had just traversed.

Barrett managed to get to the door before his Seeker, sliding the door open and closed for him. Then they were both past the danger, and they let out their breaths simultaneously.

The guardroom was usually crowded at this time of day, during the dusk shift, with guards coming off-duty or getting ready to start their duties for the evening. Not surprisingly, the room was presently deserted, except for a knot of guards standing near the door leading to the dungeon's entry hall.

Mr. Taylor did not hesitate, but moved to the left, so that he would be hidden from the view of the guards who would no doubt quiz him and Barrett if they tried to move past. This left them standing in front of the door to the long, slender room that made up the guards' washroom.

With professional courtesy, Mr. Taylor waited for Barrett to enter first. As a Seeker, he could only enter this room as the guest of a guard, for Seekers had their own living quarters in the inner dungeon – their "cells" – and it was there that they partook of their refreshment. Barrett, who had moved to living quarters in the outer dungeon when he reached seniority, rarely came to this washroom any more, though he had many fond memories of the place.

"Sanitation," Barrett's sergeant major had once said to him, "is more of a problem for our army than for the Vovimian army." What he meant was that, in Vovim, washings and calls of nature were done in public, with merely a minimal division between sexes. Only the homes of the elite had private water closets; mid-class folk and commoners made do with communal privies. Nearly every Vovimian boy grew up used to bathing

and relieving himself in public, just as every Yclau boy considered privacy in such matters to be a hallmark of civilization.

It had come as a considerable shock to Barrett, as a young guard in the Eternal Dungeon, when he had discovered that the guards' washroom consisted of a single room, with no stalls to divide the occupants from one another. A ceramic trough on one side of the room carried away bodily fluids; a ceramic trough on the other side of the room held the bathing water. The latter trough had been replaced with separate showerheads in recent years, but still the principle remained: the Eternal Dungeon's guards bathed in public, not in private.

It had not taken long for Barrett to understand the reason for this and to understand what the other guards felt at sharing the same sort of conditions that their prisoners did. In most dungeons, prisoners were humiliated by being required to relieve themselves and bathe themselves in cells that could be watched by their guards at any time. The Eternal Dungeon, in its usual topsy-turvy manner, made public bathing an act of pride for its guards, and the guards in turn found subtle ways to indicate to prisoners that they did not look down on the prisoners for being forced to bathe and relieve themselves in public.

Guards being guards, they had found other ways in which to enjoy this place. Barrett had been present one long winter night when a group of his fellow day guards had decided to clean one another. They had no fear of interruption by Mr. Smith, who never visited the washroom and who was well ensconced on this night in a prisoner's breaking cell. Nobody in the dungeon would have thought to interrupt a Seeker at his searching, over so trivial a matter. As a result, not much time had passed before sponges and soap were replaced with lips and tongues, while nipples and groins had become the favored spots to be cleaned. This had led, in due time, to a friendly argument over whether use of the soap as a lubricant was likely to cause irritation to the skin.

Barrett, who had been an observer rather than a participant, had nonetheless jumped half a foot in the air when the washroom door – which he had carefully locked himself – had suddenly banged open to reveal the High Seeker, carrying a very large bottle filled with pale liquid.

"Gentlemen," said Layle Smith, as guards with burning faces scrambled to their feet, "you are members of the royal dungeon, the elite among the guards of this queendom. You are famed for your ability to be ready for duty at all times. On no account do I wish to ever see you unprepared again." And he had swept out of the room, leaving behind him the large bottle, which proved, upon examination, to be filled with lovemaking liquid.

It was thus, and through similar, darkly humorous episodes, that Layle Smith had managed to put across his point to the guards and Seekers: "Don't you dare break the Code, because if you do, I will know."

Now Barrett and Mr. Taylor made their way through the mist of spray emitted by the shower of a lone guard, who took no notice of their passing. Not until they had exited through the door at the opposite end of the room and were standing in the entry hall did Barrett ask, "Do you know which Seeker that was?"

Mr. Taylor did not respond to his question; the junior Seeker's gaze was travelling across the entry hall, which was filled with guards and Seekers. "Excuse me," Mr. Taylor murmured, and stepped away.

Barrett watched him walk over to Mr. Chapman, who was handing a report to the Record-keeper. All around the room, men were talking, and since they were not bothering to lower their voices, Barrett began to hear pieces of what had occurred. He waited patiently, knowing that half of what was being said was rumor, and that his Seeker would soon know the full truth.

He was wrong, though. Mr. Chapman responded to Mr. Taylor's quiet enquiry with a shake of the head and a brief response. Mr. Taylor nodded and immediately turned away. When he had returned, Barrett said, "He won't tell you?"

"No. It's a matter for senior members only."

"Ah." Barrett glanced around the entry hall again. From what he could see, the news had travelled well beyond the senior Seekers and guards, but Weldon Chapman was notorious for sticking to regulations, even when those regulations had already been broken by others. "In that case, sir . . ."

"Go ahead," responded Mr. Taylor with a wave of the hand. "I'll wait for you in the breaking-cell corridor."

Barrett returned to him within five minutes, having paused only to pass word to Mr. Phelps, who had just come on duty, and who was making a manful effort to await the news through proper channels. Barrett was a "proper channel," and so he had quickly briefed the junior night guard before making his way back to Elsdon Taylor.

"It's Mr. Newton, sir," he said at once. "Mr. Chapman says that—"

"Mr. Boyd," Elsdon Taylor interrupted sharply, "is it necessary to my duties that I know this?"

Barrett was taken aback. He had forgotten that Mr. Taylor was said to have just as strong an aversion to gossip as the High Seeker did. It took him only a second, though, to formulate his reply. "I think so, sir. It could affect the High Seeker's state of mind. Mr. Chapman hinted as much – I suppose that was his way of suggesting I should tell you."

After a moment, Mr. Taylor nodded, and Barrett added, "Mr. Newton was found to have been arranging for the delivery of letters between his prisoner and the prisoner's family."

"For a bribe?" suggested Mr. Taylor. They both knew how serious a matter that would be; the Eternal Dungeon prided itself as being the only prison in the queendom where all prisoners were treated in an equal fashion, without favoritism being shown toward prisoners who were rich enough to bribe their guards and Seekers.

"No, sir. Apparently he just felt sorry for the prisoner, since the prisoner was quite attached to his family."

They both fell silent, contemplating this. Finally Mr. Taylor said, "The rule against prisoners communicating with outsiders exists for a reason. Prisoners could easily obtain information from outsiders that would allow them to escape, or they could send letters that warned fellow criminals to flee. Since a prisoner is always permitted to spend time with his family on the day of his trial, it's not wise to allow him to send letters during his usually brief period of imprisonment here."

"Yes, of course, sir," Barrett agreed. He did not say what they both knew: that the High Seeker would have dealt in the past with such a well-meant action by reprimanding the Seeker, not beating him.

"Who reported Mr. Newton?" asked Elsdon Taylor suddenly.

"He did, sir. In light of the High Seeker's recent announcement, Mr. Newton thought it best to report himself, rather than place that burden on his guards, who were aware of the correspondence."

"And he received how many lashes after he confessed?"

"Mr. Chapman said he was being given the full penalty for such Code-breaking, sir: forty medium lashes."

Mr. Taylor said nothing as the door to the entry hall opened to admit night-duty guards on their way to relieve the dusk shift. Finally Barrett added, "This will mean that fewer dungeon dwellers report themselves for misdeeds."

Mr. Taylor did not respond to this obvious statement. Instead he looked over Barrett's shoulder and said, "You're ready, Mr. Phelps? Good. We shouldn't leave the prisoner awaiting us any longer."

The junior Seeker started down the hall, and Barrett automatically fell into step behind him, one pace behind his Seeker, slightly to the right. Mr. Phelps was walking one pace behind Mr. Taylor, slightly to the left, and Barrett wondered whether he should pass on to the junior night guard what Mr. Taylor had told him about the prisoner. Ordinarily he would have done so in an automatic manner, but the thought of Mr. Taylor's disapproval of his gossip lingered in his thoughts. Perhaps, he thought, he should consult with his new Seeker as to what his preferences were in such matters.

They approached the breaking cell where the prisoner awaited his Seeker.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The prisoner was meek and gentle and very, very afraid. He had gone down on both knees the moment Elsdon Taylor entered the cell, and it had taken a good many soft words by Mr. Taylor to persuade him that he need not stay there. Now he stood with his left arm behind his back, his left hand locked in front of his right elbow, in the manner of a well-trained servant. He looked as though he would faint at any moment.

In light of Mr. Holloway's diffidence, Barrett could not figure out what he and Mr. Phelps were doing in the cell. Their presence was not against regulations; any Seeker might choose to keep his guards at his side if he were searching a particularly dangerous prisoner. But guards had an inhibiting effect on prisoners' willingness to speak truthfully, and so the *Code of Seeking* strongly discouraged Seekers from keeping guards in the breaking cell during a searching.

It was not a good sign, that Elsdon Taylor would come so close to breaking the Code on Barrett's first day of duty.

Barrett tried giving a brief smile to the prisoner, who looked so alarmed at this development that Barrett abandoned all friendly overtures. He would have liked to have looked away, knowing that having three pairs of eyes on him could not be easy for the prisoner, but his duty required him to watch the prisoner any time he entered the cell. So he focussed his attention on the prisoner's scar. It must have been well hidden by hair when the prisoner was younger, but now, with the prisoner's hair thin and wispy with old age, anyone could see clearly what the elder Earl had done when Mr. Holloway was young.

"Yes, sir," the prisoner was responding now in a quavering voice. "My wife is always with me at night. Her family is dead, and she pays all her calls to friends during the daytime."

"And do you share a bedroom, Mr. Holloway?" Elsdon Taylor asked. As regulation required, he was standing, and he was doing so at a considerable distance from the prisoner. Barrett wondered again what danger Mr. Taylor sensed about the prisoner that was opaque to Barrett's own vision.

The prisoner blushed at this question. "We . . . we are fortunate to have a cottage with two bedrooms. We share my bedroom only on the nights when we engage in . . . conjugal relations. About twice a week. Sometimes thrice."

Out of the corner of his eye, Barrett saw Mr. Phelps raise his eyebrows. Barrett was too experienced to do likewise, but he gave a second glance at his prisoner's body. The man was seventy-three years old now; he must retain a certain vigor beyond which his frail body suggested.

"Your wife," Mr. Taylor said, as though pursuing the same thought, "is twenty-two years younger than you?"

"Yes, sir, and she's a great help to me. I . . ." His voice faded out, and the ball in his throat bobbled. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to volunteer information."

"No, go on, pursue your thought." Mr. Taylor's voice was gentle. Barrett had learned from other guards that Mr. Taylor's voice was always gentle when he was searching. He used that gentleness to great effect to break unwary prisoners.

"Well, sir, my memory is not as well honed as it could be. Sometimes I forget things: where I laid my pen and journal, where I placed a book I want, where I hung a shirt. My wife is nearly always able to find such things for me."

"Journal?" said Mr. Taylor, picking up on the word.

"My health journal, sir. I've had bad headaches every few months or so during the last five years. My healer thought it might be due to the head injury I sustained as a young man, after I so foolishly disobeyed my master. He asked me to keep a record of when I had my headaches."

"And when you have these headaches, what happens?"

"I go to bed, sir. The quinine that my healer prescribed for my headaches has failed to relieve them, so I just try to sleep them out."

"And your wife does not share your bed on those nights?"

"No, sir." The prisoner sounded puzzled now. "She sees that I have water by my bed, and she checks on me in the morning, but otherwise she lets me rest."

"And did you have a headache on the night on which the younger Earl of Hartgrove was attacked?"

"Why, yes, sir." The prisoner sounded truly puzzled now. "How did you know?"

Mr. Taylor flicked a glance at Barrett, who carefully extracted from the inner breast pocket of his jacket the small memorandum book and pencil there. Jotting down a note to himself to submit a request for the seizure of the journal for evidence, he cursed the city soldiers' penchant for ignoring the obvious. A dated diary showing the pattern of the prisoner's health – surely they should have understood that object's possible significance.

The paper of his memorandum book seemed unnaturally bright under the newly installed electric lights in the ceiling. Already he was missing the soft waver of the furnace fires that had long burned behind the frosted glass blocks of every breaking cell – though he supposed that this prisoner, with his thick spectacles, might prefer the steady electric light. Certainly the new heating system seemed to be working well, pumping a steady stream of warm air into the cell. It was a shame that the High Seeker couldn't take the hint from this and move the Eternal Dungeon into the modern age in other ways.

"And how did you first learn of the attack on the Earl, Mr. Holloway?" asked Elsdon Taylor.

"From my wife, sir. She heard the balladeers singing the news when she went to fetch food from the grocer's the next morning, and so she brought back a ballad for me, since she knew that I had served with that family. She sang it to me over breakfast, and then I went upstairs to change out of my dressing gown and to prepare a note of condolence to the Earl's manservant for the pain that his household had undergone."

"You knew the manservant?"

"No, sir. But it seemed more proper to address myself to him than to the Earl. I . . . was once foolish enough to send letters to men much higher than myself, and in the arrogance of my youth, I let them think I was of their class. Fortunately, the men I corresponded with forgave me when they learned of my deception, and even showed me great kindness. But of course I would not trouble my betters again in such a way."

"You have said that you were treated kindly by the younger Earl, I believe."

"Oh, yes, sir. He never spoke an unkind word to me when he was a boy, and he sent me a most gracious note after his father's death."

Mr. Taylor nodded. Barrett wondered whether it was only his imagination that this line of enquiry had utterly foundered. Either the prisoner was truly innocent of all misdeeds, or he was a consummate liar – and if he was the latter, Barrett could not imagine how Mr. Taylor would go about breaking him.

"Mr. Holloway," said Mr. Taylor quietly, "you stated that your wife would do anything for you."

"Anything within the law, I meant, sir," the prisoner responded quickly, evidently seeing danger in this question. "She is an upright woman and would never assist in any matter that was unlawful."

"But if the matter appeared lawful, she would do it?"

The prisoner hesitated, apparently uneasy at the use of the word "appeared," but finally said, "Yes, sir."

"And so she delivered your note to the soldiers, telling them where to find the bloody shirt and knife."

The prisoner's mouth opened, and stayed open, like that of a fish. Out of the corner of his eye, Barrett could see that Mr. Phelps's mouth had likewise fallen open.

"Mr. Holloway," Elsdon Taylor said gently, "you are in the Eternal Dungeon. You could not have thought you could conceal such a matter here for long."

The prisoner bit his lip and stared at the floor. Barrett had a sudden, vivid image of him as a young man, confronting the wrath of the angry Earl.

"How did the shirt come to be in your wardrobe, Mr. Holloway?" The junior Seeker kept his voice soft.

"I don't know, sir." The prisoner's voice quavered. "I swear by all the Queen's mercy, I have no idea how it came to be in my wardrobe."

"When did you find it there?"

"On the morning after the Earl's death, when I went upstairs to change. I . . . I nearly fainted when I saw it. And then I saw the knife, just like the knife that the balladeer said had been used to kill the Earl. . . . I'm sorry, sir; I should have reported it at once, and I should have told you at once that I had found it. It was very wrong of me to seek to conceal that information from you."

"Why did you decide eventually to alert the soldiers?"

"I . . . I just did. It seemed the right thing to do."

"You did not consult with anyone?"

"No, sir." The prisoner's voice was firmer now. "I was the only one who knew about the shirt, and I consulted with no one."

There was a pause, giving Barrett time to wonder how his Seeker was determining which of these answers were true and which were false. He himself could not have guessed – which was probably just as well, as he did not wish to be the one responsible for declaring the punishment for a false answer.

Mr. Taylor said, quite softly, "You have saved your money over the years?"

"Yes, sir," said the prisoner, looking startled at the change of topic. "I am a man of little needs, and I have received generous sums of money from my patrons and from the sales of my books. My income has grown lesser in recent years, but it's of no matter, for I have assured myself enough money to see myself and my wife through to our final days. That being the case, I have been making plans to give the rest to the hospital for paupers that cared for me when I was young."

Mr. Phelps frowned. Barrett was frowning too. He was no Seeker, but he had read enough penny-novel tales to be able to guess what was coming next.

Mr. Taylor did not disappoint them. "Your wife," he said, "is twenty-two years younger than you."

Perhaps the prisoner had read the same novels; he instantly paled. "Sir, you cannot mean— Sir, my wife has never been greedy for money; you cannot think that she would seek to increase her wealth by—"

"Who receives your money in the event of your death or life imprisonment, Mr. Holloway?"

Mr. Holloway bit his lip again before saying, in the same firm voice he had used a short time before, "My cousin."

Elsdon Taylor sighed and briefly brought his fingers up to cover the eye-holes of his hood. When he finally looked up, he said, "I am very sorry to hear you say that, sir. You ought to have guessed that I have been given access to your legal records; I know that your wife is named as the sole recipient of your fortunes in your will. Take off your shirt, please, and face the wall, just under that ring. Mr. Phelps?"

Mr. Phelps, quick to gather in the situation, had already taken into hand his coiled whip. The prisoner now looked as though he would pass out within seconds. Barrett, glancing in an assessing manner at Mr. Holloway, shook his head and handed Mr. Phelps the binding rope he himself had just slipped out of his trouser pocket. Under normal circumstances, he, as senior guard, would bind the prisoner, while Mr. Phelps would beat him, but in a case like this, with a seventy-three-year-old prisoner, he did not want to take any chances with Mr. Phelps's unknown skill with the whip. He managed to catch Mr. Taylor's eye as the Seeker backed up to provide room for the guards, and Mr. Taylor nodded slightly, approving the switch.

The prisoner, obedient if not truthful, had stripped himself now of his shirt and had turned to face the far wall. Returning his coiled whip to its usual clip on his belt, Mr. Phelps bound the prisoner's wrists to the whipping ring high upon the wall. Barrett noticed, with an inward sigh, that the binding rope had begun to fray again. It was made of a soft hemp that was

thought by the High Seeker to cause less abrasion to prisoners' skin than the leather binders that had been used in the prison for decades, but the rope continually frayed, leaving guards with the duty of cutting off frayed ends at spare moments. Barrett would just have soon kept the leather binders, but he had not been consulted.

The life of a guard, he thought to himself as the prisoner wriggled in his bonds, trying to catch sight of Mr. Phelps's whip, evidently believing that the junior guard would both bind him and beat him. Barrett did not bother to correct his misapprehension. His eye was on the junior Seeker, and he was wondering what Mr. Taylor was feeling at this moment. Not the sadistic thrill that the High Seeker would have felt, surely. At one time, it was rumored, Mr. Taylor had received a certain emotional release from watching beatings, but that was when he was younger and had only recently been permitted escape from the care of an abusive father. These days, Barrett guessed, Mr. Taylor probably relished the sight of a tortured prisoner no more than he himself did.

Elsdon Taylor's voice remained steady, though, as he said, "I told you at the start, Mr. Holloway, that there would be adverse consequences for you if you lied to me. However, I want you to understand that your honest responses will receive their due reward. The prisoner is securely bound, Mr. Phelps?" The junior Seeker walked forward to the prisoner, who was still trying to catch sight of Mr. Phelps behind him; as he did so, Mr. Taylor quickly held up five fingers toward Barrett.

Mr. Phelps, stepping back now that his duty was over, caught sight of the gesture and waggled his eyebrows at Barrett, obviously enquiring as to whether Mr. Taylor had given the proper number. Barrett nodded back. Five light lashes was the minimum of punishment that the Code permitted to a prisoner who lied, but in a case like this – where the prisoner had a spotless record and was clearly lying to protect his wife rather than himself – such a low punishment seemed justified.

He could only hope that the High Seeker would agree.

Barrett took a quick look at the prisoner's back. He disliked what he saw. Like a vulture, old age had stripped flesh from the prisoner; the back barely held any fat, and Barrett suspected that it had never held much

muscle. The prisoner's ribs stood out against his skin. It was going to be very hard to find places to land the lash that wouldn't cause excruciating pain, and severe pain was not permitted in a light beating. With only five lashes planned, however, he thought he could manage to locate room for the lashes.

Being right-handed, he moved to the left side, beyond the prisoner's vision. Mr. Taylor had already taken his own place, along the wall to the right of the prisoner. The prisoner, without need for instruction, was watching his Seeker.

"Mr. Holloway," Elsdon Taylor said softly, "I know that you spent your boyhood in a household where honesty was not rewarded. So did I. You need to understand that matters are very different in the Eternal Dungeon. In this place, lies represent pain, while honesty and a desire for reparation represent relief from pain. That would be true even if you were never touched by an instrument of torture. This time, the lesson in pain and lack of pain will come from me; I hope that, in the future, you will be able to bring your own peace to yourself."

Barrett, doing a last-minute check of his whip to see that it was ready for business, wondered what the bloody blades Mr. Taylor was talking about. The only "relief from pain" that the prisoner would experience would be the end of his beating, and that ending would have no connection with honesty or lack of honesty. He inwardly shrugged and set his mind back to the task at hand.

"Yes, sir," said the prisoner, clearly as bewildered as Barrett was.

"One lash to begin with, then, in punishment of your previous lie. Mr. Phelps, are we ready?" He looked over at the junior guard, who was standing directly behind the prisoner, and who now had the task of determining, from his central position, whether the three men in front of him were all in the right position for the beating.

"We are ready, sir," said Mr. Phelps, his mid-class accent clipped short, more so than usual. Barrett guessed that he was no more eager to witness this beating than Barrett was to give it.

"One," said Mr. Taylor, his gaze now fixed upon the prisoner's face.

Barrett pulled back the whip and landed it on the spot he had selected, a narrow band of muscles below the jutting shoulder-blades. The prisoner gasped. Barrett flicked back the lash, satisfied. If he had landed the lash wrong, the prisoner would have screamed.

"Now, then," said Mr. Taylor to the prisoner, "I am going to ask you four questions. Every time you respond to one those questions with a lie, you will receive three more lashes than you just received. Do you understand, Mr. Holloway?"

The prisoner's breath was heavy, which was just as well, as it covered up the sound of Barrett muttering curses to himself. He totted up the numbers in his head. One lash to start with, and then four more lashes multiplied by four – seventeen lashes total was within the maximum of twenty lashes that could be given for this offense, but it was too many for such a slight matter. And Barrett could not imagine where he would find room within the narrow ridge of back muscles for that many lashes. The prisoner would surely be screaming in agony by the end.

Well, his job was to deliver the lashes, not decide how many should occur. Grimly, he held himself in readiness.

"Did your wife know the contents of the note, Mr. Holloway?" the junior Seeker asked.

"No." The prisoner's voice was faint but firm. Mr. Phelps winced. Probably, like Barrett, he was beginning to figure out the pattern that Elsdon Taylor had already perceived: which tone of voice revealed that the prisoner was lying.

"Two through five," was Mr. Taylor's response, and Barrett brought down the lash four times, in rapid succession. He landed them where he had planned to land the final four lashes when he had thought there would be only five. Then he paused, sweating, not only because of his exertion, but because he could not figure out any place to land the lash next that would not cause the prisoner unnecessary pain.

The prisoner was sobbing now. Mr. Taylor, backing away, said, "Mr. Phelps, would you please wipe Mr. Holloway's face?"

Mr. Phelps came forward, handkerchief in hand, and silently wiped away the moisture that was dripping from the prisoner's forehead and eyes and nose. The prisoner said to him, in a shaking voice, "Does your whip have knots?"

Mr. Phelps backed out of sight, properly leaving it to his Seeker to respond to the prisoner's question.

"No, Mr. Holloway," said Elsdon Taylor, returning to his previous spot. "None of the whips in the Eternal Dungeon are designed to maim. And I promise you: If you answer the next three questions truthfully, you will receive no more strokes."

Mr. Phelps turned to Barrett, his face filled with consternation. Barrett struggled to figure out what his Seeker had in mind. It was strange enough, that Mr. Taylor should be questioning the prisoner during a beating. Usually questioning was reserved for when the prisoner was on the rack, when lies would be punished by greater pain, while honesty would be rewarded by—

Ah. The answer came to him in the same moment that Mr. Taylor asked, "Did your wife know the contents of the note?"

The prisoner, after a breathless moment, whispered, "Yes."

Mr. Taylor held up his hand, warding off any potential blows, in case Barrett should have misunderstood his intentions. "Did your wife suggest the wording of the note?"

The prisoner was beginning to cry again, and not from the pain of the previous lashes, Barrett guessed. "Yes."

"Is she the one who suggested that you report the shirt's presence to the soldiers?"

The prisoner replied only with a nod this time; he was crying too hard to speak.

"Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Holloway. Mr. Phelps, you may release the prisoner."

Barrett, slowly coiling up his whip, wondered to himself why he ever bothered to try to second-guess Seekers. In this case, though, he thought he was justified in feeling more than a little confused.

What Elsdon Taylor had just done was quite out of the ordinary. Normally, torture was divided into two categories in the Eternal Dungeon: a fixed degree of pain for punishment through a beating, and an indeterminate degree of pain for punishment and questioning through the rack. When beaten, prisoners simply received the punishment they had incurred for their ill behavior. When racked, on the other hand, they were encouraged to answer questions honestly by being told that they would receive less pain or release if they were truthful.

Mr. Taylor had just reversed that custom by giving Mr. Holloway an indeterminate punishment through beating; as he had promised, he had given Mr. Holloway relief from pain when the prisoner answered truthfully. Rapidly, Barrett reviewed in his mind the relevant sections of the *Code of Seeking*. He could not see any point at which his Seeker had violated the Code. Indeed, if asked by the High Seeker, Barrett could truthfully say that Mr. Taylor had told him to give the prisoner five lashes, and he had done so.

Barrett sighed. Life with Mr. Taylor, he was beginning to suspect, would be like walking on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the inevitable moment when the ground gave way.

He glanced over at Mr. Phelps, who was still holding the frayed rope. The junior guard's brow was furrowed as he looked down. Barrett refrained from rebuking Mr. Phelps from taking his eye off the prisoner; he himself was worried. He was always worried after a prisoner was searched under torture.

Belatedly, he was beginning to recognize what Mr. Taylor must have recognized from the moment he examined the prisoner's records: Mr. Holloway had a record of lying. He had been forced to lie in his youth, in order to cover up his furtive education and his scholarly work; then, when the truth had emerged, he had been viciously beaten by the man questioning him. Little wonder that Mr. Holloway had lied to protect his wife; his only experience till now had been that truth was rewarded with

unjust punishment. Mr. Taylor had questioned Mr. Holloway under torture in order to teach him, in a quick and relatively painless manner, that any truthful statements he made to the Seeker would be rewarded, not punished.

It all made sense, if . . . if Mr. Holloway had indeed spoken the truth under torture. Mr. Urman's voice drifted into Barrett's mind: "If you hurt a prisoner enough, he'll say anything he thinks you want to hear."

Barrett shook his head and tried to focus his thoughts back on the scene before him: the Seeker standing in the middle of the cell, with Mr. Phelps a yard behind him, still fingering the binding rope, and the prisoner standing as far as he could from the Seeker and guards, in the corner of the cell nearest to the whipping ring. He was wiping the moisture off his face with his sleeve, and he was trembling.

Barrett glanced at Mr. Taylor. The young Seeker had an upright carriage and was standing still, embodying all the authority of the Queen's Seekers. It was a reassuring stance. Barrett reminded himself that he was serving as guard to one of the most talented men in the dungeon. What was dark and murky to him was no doubt clear as sunlight to Elsdon Taylor.

"Mr. Holloway," said Mr. Taylor, "if you believe anything I tell you, please believe this now: I am going to ask you a question, and there will be no penalty for you, regardless of what answer you make. I will trust that you are giving me the truth, and I will not punish you under any circumstances. Do you understand?"

Mr. Holloway, looking understandably unnerved by this turn of events, nodded as he steeled himself for the question.

Still soft in tone, Mr. Taylor asked, "Did you answer the last three questions truthfully during your beating?"

All of Barrett's trust crashed in on him, as though the cavern holding the Eternal Dungeon had suddenly collapsed.

Mr. Taylor didn't know. He didn't know whether the prisoner had given his answers under torture because they were truthful or because he thought it

was the only way to stop the torture. And if a Seeker of Mr. Taylor's talent didn't know . . .

Hundreds of prisoners. Barrett had tortured hundreds of prisoners in the Eternal Dungeon, and dozens of them had died because of witness they had given under that torture. How many innocent men had ended their lives in the hangman's noose because Barrett had hurt a prisoner enough that he would say anything he thought his guards and Seeker wanted to hear?

Barrett felt the sudden urge to vomit. He glanced at Mr. Phelps, wondering whether the junior guard was undergoing a similar agony of conscience, but the other guard continued to seem more concerned with the frayed rope than with what was taking place. And why should he not be? He was relatively new to the Eternal Dungeon; he trusted that the Seekers knew what they were doing. Barrett himself had always held such trust; if Elsdon Taylor had not held scruples above that of the other Seekers Barrett had served under, Barrett would never have questioned Mr. Taylor's knowledge.

He nearly missed the prisoner's answer when it came. "Sir," said Mr. Holloway in a wavering voice, "I can see that you are a man of good character and that you do not wish me harm. I regret exceedingly that I ever sought to hide the truth from you. But you must understand . . . my wife . . ."

"Mr. Holloway, if your wife is innocent, anything you say can only help her." Mr. Taylor's voice was firm. "If she is not, then her soul lies in peril at this moment, and hiding the truth won't help her."

Mr. Holloway gulped visibly before saying, "She *is* innocent, sir – you must believe me. When she had recovered from her shock of seeing the shirt on that first morning I discovered it, her only thought was to protect me. She suggested that we bury the shirt and knife in the back garden late at night, when nobody would see. We . . . we did consider doing that, sir." Mr. Holloway's voice trembled yet more as he made this confession.

"Quite understandable," Mr. Taylor responded in a reassuring voice. "Nobody wishes to be accused unjustly of committing a crime."

Mr. Holloway seemed to take courage from this statement. He straightened his back and said in a calmer voice, "We talked about it for several days. Each day, my wife would go to buy food, and we would hear from the balladeers what the news was. She even bought newspapers so that we could read the official accounts. Every day, the news said that the soldiers investigating the crime could find no clues as to what had happened. 'The trail is not merely cold but frozen,' one of the soldiers said.

"That was what decided us in the end. The shirt and knife were the only clue to who the murderer was; we couldn't hold back such evidence, not when the victim was so upright a man as my former master's son. We agreed that we must tell the soldiers. It was my wife's idea that I should write an anonymous note. Perhaps . . . perhaps that part of the plan was not such a good idea."

"No," Mr. Taylor agreed. "You would have been less likely to fall under suspicion if you had reported the matter openly."

Mr. Holloway shook his head. "Sir, we did not think straight. At the time, all I could think was that, if we truthfully stated that we had known about the shirt for days, we would be arrested for withholding evidence. I was willing to pay any penalty necessary for what I had done, but my wife—"

His voice broke suddenly, and tears streamed down his face. "My wife, sir. She did no harm, she sought only to protect me, and yet the soldiers took her away. What will happen to her?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Barrett saw Mr. Phelps pause in the middle of some action with the rope. Mr. Taylor replied quietly, "I will communicate with the women's prison to let them know the testimony you have offered on her behalf. Mr. Boyd, if you would kindly make a note—" The Seeker turned toward the guards, and then stopped speaking abruptly.

Barrett quickly looked at where Mr. Taylor was staring. Mr. Phelps was caught in the act of carefully cutting away the frayed ends of the rope with his dagger. Blushing at being noticed neglecting his main duty, Mr. Phelps began to sheathe his blade.

There was a blur of motion, and before Barrett could see what had happened, the prisoner had leapt past his Seeker and grabbed Mr. Phelps's

dagger.

Mr. Phelps, startled, made no move to defend himself with his whip. Mr. Taylor said sharply, "Mr. Phelps! Back!" He himself, being unarmed, was moving as far back out of reach of the prisoner as he could, as the Code required under such circumstances.

But the prisoner, perhaps sensing from his voice that Mr. Taylor had drawn out of reach, made no attempt to move in that direction. Nor did he try to attack Mr. Phelps, who was still standing frozen, within an arm's reach of the deadly blade. Instead, just as Barrett pulled his whip from his belt, Mr. Holloway turned and rushed toward Barrett, his arm raised high as he made ready to plunge the dagger into his chosen target.

He came so swiftly that Barrett had no time in which to uncoil the whip, no time even to curse this change in events. With reflexes honed by years of experience, he pulled out his dagger, turned it in his hand, and hit the prisoner on the side of the head with the hilt in the moment before Mr. Holloway would have plunged the blade into him.

Mr. Holloway crumpled to the ground. Barrett felt his own knees weaken, and he had to step back against the wall to steady himself. Mr. Phelps had finally broken from his paralysis; he rushed over and took hold of Barrett's arm, supporting him.

Mr. Taylor, as Barrett might have predicted, had more important concerns. He ran over and dropped to his knees beside the prisoner.

This move recalled Barrett's mind to his duty. Pushing Mr. Phelps's hand away, he went down on one knee beside the prisoner, doing what Mr. Taylor could not do without breaking the Code: he placed his fingers upon Mr. Holloway's neck, searching for a pulse.

His search for life was cut short by a groan from Mr. Holloway. The prisoner struggled into a sitting position. Mr. Phelps, his brow furrowed once more, quickly knelt down, sheathed the fallen blade, and bound the prisoner's hands behind him with the frayed rope. The prisoner barely seemed to notice. He was staring at the Seeker, his eyes unfocussed.

"My head," he muttered. "It hurts even worse than before. Did I pass out?"

"Yes, Mr. Holloway; my senior night guard knocked you unconscious. Are you well?"

Barrett, who had taken firm hold of the prisoner's arm to prevent him from lunging forward, felt Mr. Phelps tense beside him. Young as the guard was, he already knew that, under such circumstances as this, a Seeker's enquiry after a prisoner's health was a most ominous question. The words the prisoner spoke during the next few minutes – any excuses he offered for his conduct, whether it be ill health or fear or some other cause – would help to determine his coming fate.

The prisoner seemed not to have heard Mr. Taylor's question. With eyes still unfocussed, he said, "But why did he hit me? I didn't do anything wrong."

Mr. Taylor's eyes rose and came to rest upon the face of his senior night guard. He and Barrett exchanged looks.

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Barrett glanced into the cell to see that Mr. Phelps was remaining properly attentive to the prisoner, then carefully closed and locked the cell door. A full five minutes after the beating had ended, Mr. Holloway's screams were only just beginning to diminish. Barrett glanced down the corridor in the direction of the healer's office, half expecting to see Mr. Bergsen, their regular healer, striding toward them, cursing Seekers and guards at the top of his lungs for their brutal treatment of prisoners. With Mr. Holloway's screams and pleas still ringing in his ears, Barrett did not feel he could have denied such a charge, even though he knew that his Seeker had had no choice but to order the beating, after Mr. Holloway had denied responsibility for his actions.

Mr. Taylor was rubbing his eyes with his fingertips, as though he had spent all night tending a prisoner on the rack, rather than having a brief searching session interrupted by an unexpected attack and punishment. "Mr. Boyd," he said, "I wish that Mr. Urman was tending this prisoner instead of you."

Barrett had begun to step away in order to fetch the healer, a necessary action after a medium beating. Now he went still. A rebuke he had

expected; he deserved nothing less for having allowed Mr. Phelps to take his gaze off the prisoner. Indeed, Barrett had already begun cursing himself for not passing on to Mr. Phelps the vitally important information that he must not draw his blade in the presence of a prisoner who feared that he would behave violently with blades. As senior night guard, it was Barrett's duty to issue orders to his Seeker's other guards, and he had neglected that duty.

So a rebuke he had expected, but this was something more than a rebuke. Barrett struggled for a response, wondering at what he point he should tender his resignation.

Mr. Taylor seemed uninterested in receiving a reply, though. Turning away, he added, "And I dearly wish that Mr. Chapman was searching this prisoner instead of I."

He walked down the corridor, in the direction of the High Seeker's office, leaving Barrett to stare after him.

CHAPTER NINE

Mr. Sobel sat silently for a long time after Barrett spoke, tapping a pencil quietly on the table between them. It was the only sound in the senior guard's living quarters. His wife and children, who followed his schedule of sleeping between the dawn and dusk shifts, were in bed now, for it was late afternoon, Mr. Sobel's equivalent of staying up long past midnight. Mr. Sobel's neighbors were similarly scheduled for the night shift and were asleep now. Barrett – who had been awake since the searching the previous evening – should have been asleep too.

When Mr. Sobel did not respond, Barrett pressed him. "What do you think he meant?"

Mr. Sobel shrugged with a vague look in his eyes, as though his mind had been far away from the conversation. "I'm not the High Seeker, able to read Mr. Taylor's mind. I can only think of one thing that Mr. Chapman and Mr. Urman hold in common."

"They both have commoner accents?" Barrett said slowly. When Mr. Sobel nodded, Barrett leaned back in his chair – one of the plain, functional chairs that appeared in the living quarters of all the dungeon dwellers. He found that he was tapping on the table too, with his dagger hilt, and he forcibly stopped himself. "I'd been wondering about that: why he attacked me rather than Mr. Phelps. It was Mr. Phelps who bound him to the whipping ring, and he thought it was Mr. Phelps who beat him. So why should he choose to attack me, when I'd done nothing except smile at him?"

"Many of our commoner prisoners resent the elite, often with good reason," responded Mr. Sobel. "It wouldn't be the first time that a prisoner attacked a guard who had the wrong accent. Usually, though, such prisoners don't try to deny knowledge afterwards of what they have done."

"I hit him on the head. That can cause momentary confusion."

"And did somebody hit the Earl of Hartgrove's attacker on the head?"

"I don't know," said Barrett slowly, thinking of the prisoner's old scar. He stared down at the dagger, using its blade to crease down the folds of the

paper in front of him.

Mr. Sobel caught himself in mid-yawn in order to say, "Documentwork?"

Barrett nodded, unfolding it for Mr. Sobel to see. "Requests for release of information. Mr. Taylor wants me to go through the prisoner's health journal, to see whether it reveals any patterns. He's particularly worried because Mr. Holloway hinted that he had a headache just before he attacked me. Also, Mr. Taylor placed a petition to have the prisoner's financial records released."

"The prisoner's bank will likely fight that petition." Mr. Sobel reached for Barrett's glass to refill it with water – except in the Seekers' common room, water and tea were the only drinks that were permitted to adult dungeon dwellers, since those were the only drinks permitted to prisoners. "The city banks pride themselves on protecting their clients' privacy."

"Mr. Taylor only wants names, not money figures. He says that, if he knows who the prisoner's patrons are, he may be able to persuade them to yield up their correspondence with Mr. Holloway, which could shed light on his thoughts and activities. Mr. Taylor has received first-level authorization from the High Seeker for his petition."

Mr. Sobel raised his eyebrows. "The prisoner's bank won't be able to fight that. What about his patrons?"

"Mostly elite men, Mr. Taylor thinks, judging from the affidavits that have been submitted on the prisoner's behalf."

Mr. Sobel shook his head as he took up his pencil again. "Dukes and marquesses and earls will look down their noses at first-level authorization petitions. You'll have to get the help of the Queen."

"Her Secretary has submitted an affidavit in favor of the prisoner."

Mr. Sobel winced. "You won't get the Queen's ear on this matter, I fear, unless the High Seeker intervenes, and he's busy with other matters at the moment. How old did you say this prisoner was?"

"Seventy-three."

"Some of his original patrons must have died, then, since they would be older than him."

"Most of them have, I suspect. Mr. Holloway said that his income has diminished in recent years."

Mr. Sobel nodded. "Rather than send a petition for the correspondence, you might want to suggest to Mr. Taylor that he write directly to the families of the former patrons. You know that Elsdon Taylor is descended from the Queen's great-great-grandmother?"

Barrett nodded. "He holds no title, though. He can't claim to be of the highest elite."

"Which is why he'd be unlikely to make any headway with Mr. Holloway's surviving patrons, but widows can often be impressed by mentions of lineage." Mr. Sobel dropped the pencil on the table; it rolled off, being of a modern, cylindrical design. "If Mr. Taylor decides to take this course, tell him I can assign Mr. Urman to draft the letter. Mr. Taylor's usual modesty would get in the way of him mentioning his high-born status, but Mr. Urman has no such scruples. I've heard him give the full run-down on Elsdon Taylor's accomplishments."

Mr. Barrett frowned. "Mr. Taylor can't be too exact in his claims. Other than the Guild of Magistrates and the Queen's councillors, nobody outside this dungeon except his brother knows that the Elsdon Taylor who works as a Seeker is the same Elsdon Taylor whose late father ran this city's tannery – the largest in our queendom. I didn't even know his family lineage till he told me."

Mr. Sobel shrugged again, retrieving his pencil. "He is hooded; the widows will expect reticence from him concerning his life in the lighted world. I don't suppose there's a single Seeker in this dungeon, save Mr. Smith, whose past has been publicized. But Mr. Taylor has the right to use the seal of the Queen's extended family; that should impress the widows, if nothing else does." He glanced at the paper Barrett had handed him before. "Are those the only petitions he's making?"

"They're the only ones he could think of. He said I could add more. Do you have any suggestions?"

Mr. Sobel's pencil went tap-tap-tap on the table a dozen times before the High Seeker's guard reached forward and scribbled something onto the next blank line.

Barrett glanced at what he had written and then looked up enquiringly.

Mr. Sobel gave a small smile. "Layle Smith has often said that one of the worst mistakes a Seeker can make is to assume that a murderer has only committed one murder." He pushed the paper over to Barrett's side of the table, and then winced, as though the very effort had hurt him.

Barrett said, "You should retire to bed."

"I should have retired to bed three days ago. That's what my wife says."

"You've been awake for three days?" Barrett raised his eyebrows, but let that be his strongest reaction. Unlike Mr. Urman – who was gifted in ignoring obvious signs of suffering on the part of his fellow guards – Barrett knew that Mr. Sobel's working hours often matched those of the High Seeker.

"Rack room duties, which meant preparations extending into the dusk shift, so I had to be awake for duty in the early afternoon. The healer kept me busy the following day, quizzing me about conditions in the rack room. Then we had medical trouble on the second night, which spared the High Seeker the formality of a death watch, but it meant I had to fill out all the usual long reports, explaining why matters had gone awry. Then I had to send telegrams to the family. Then it turned out that the prisoner was related to a pressman, so I had the happy duty of explaining to the pressman why he would have to request all information on the death through the Guild of Magistrates. He threatened to write an exposé on the Eternal Dungeon's abuse of its prisoners. I showed him a few of the news articles that had already been written on the Eternal Dungeon, and he admitted that he couldn't surpass his colleagues in their fine invectives. He threatened, though, to petition for a murder charge against the High Seeker."

Barrett shook his head. "Seekers and guards are immune from murder charges, unless such charges are placed by the High Seeker or the Codifier. The pressman should know that."

"Yes, but the High Seeker will no doubt hear of the petition, which won't help his state of mind. You know how he is whenever he loses a prisoner."

Barrett did not, in fact, know how the High Seeker was when he lost a prisoner, since Barrett had received the supreme good fortune of having served only once under the High Seeker, during the searching of a single prisoner. But seeing the dark circles under Mr. Sobel's eyes, he bit back all comments about what he had witnessed then. Before he could think of a way to gently persuade Mr. Sobel to go to bed, the other guard said, "I was tempted, though, to have the pressman give a lecture to the junior guards about the danger that Mr. Smith poses to the world."

Barrett frowned as he reached again for his cup. "Why on earth do you say that, Mr. Sobel? The High Seeker's reputation in this dungeon is already as black as the ash-pit when its lid is closed."

Mr. Sobel's gaze touched his. "You haven't been following the latest gossip."

"No." He did not add that he had assiduously avoided listening to dungeon rumors since he had realized the extent of Mr. Taylor's disapproval of gossip.

"I had Mr. Urman transferred back under me partly so that I could keep easy track of such matters, since he's the hub of all gossip in our dungeon. The tale that's being told among the junior guards now is that Layle Smith is all bark, no bite."

It took Barrett a minute to respond. It was like hearing that a rumor was circulating that the sun rose at midnight. Finally he said, "You're mocking me."

"I only wish I were."

"We're talking about *Layle Smith*. There are entire ballads written about his bloodthirsty deeds!"

Mr. Sobel shook his head wearily. "Mr. Smith's usual lecture to the dungeon dwellers about how they shouldn't believe gossip has made its mark on the junior guards, at least thus far. They don't believe the ballads, nor the tales about Mr. Smith's acts in the Hidden Dungeon."

"For love of the Queen, Mr. Sobel, they don't need to believe tales of past deeds when they have a sadist in their midst!" Barrett was having a hard time remembering to keep his voice low, even though Finlay Sobel's latest sketches – of various men and women frowning at each other – were scattered on the floor nearby, a visible reminder that the boy and his younger sisters slept nearby. "Mr. Newton—"

"Has been making light of his injuries. Many of the junior guards are fool enough to take him at his word."

"But Layle Smith's prisoners . . ."

Mr. Sobel sighed. "Mr. Boyd, many of the junior guards have been hired since 356."

Barrett reflected upon this fact before saying, "Oh."

"Yes. Their image of the High Seeker is of a lunatic who raved that he would destroy the dungeon, and never did a speck of harm to anyone. They see him as a harmless eccentric – at worst, a harmless madman. And since the time he returned to searching-duty last year, he has been keeping his activities in the breaking cells and rack rooms quiet – far too quiet. There are guards in this dungeon who have no idea what the High Seeker is like when he sets out to break someone. So they've been mocking him."

The full horror of Mr. Sobel's tale was only now beginning to descend upon Barrett, like a nightmare seizing him. "They've been mocking him," he said, as though repeating the words would cause them to vanish.

"They've been saying he's all show, with no blade to back his threats. And Elsdon Taylor tells me that things are almost as bad with the recently hired junior Seekers. He said he could make a fortune if he were given a pound for every time he has heard the word 'bluster' spoken in reference to the High Seeker."

Barrett stared at Mr. Sobel, his heart pounding. "They've said this to Mr. Smith's face?"

"Not to his face, no. The High Seeker's lessons in civility have had a certain effect on the dungeon dwellers. But he's Layle Smith – he knows what's being said about him."

Barrett stumbled to his feet, barely aware of the chair crashing to the floor behind him. "Mr. Sobel, this is like small children goading a bear, thinking that it won't maul. Has the High Seeker said anything to you about this?"

"Only one remark. He says that he finds the latest tales about him amusing."

Barrett blinked in the dim light of the living quarters, trying to make sense of this. "Amusing?"

Mr. Sobel stared down at Barrett's dagger, abandoned on the table. He said quietly, "He told me once that, when he was young, he found it amusing to allow prisoners to think he was harmless, right up to the moment he destroyed them."

Barrett's legs began to shake; he barely managed to pull the chair upright and sit down in it before his strength failed him. "Sweet blood," he whispered. "Sweet, sweet blood."

Mr. Sobel shook his head, not looking up. "I oughtn't to have told you that last part."

"I won't pass it on," Barrett promised. "But Mr. Sobel, if the High Seeker sets out to prove these rumor-mongers wrong—" He could hear his voice rising in panic, and he strove to keep control of himself. "The Codifier wouldn't permit him to destroy the Eternal Dungeon."

"The Codifier wouldn't, if he knew what the High Seeker was doing. Do you remember what Mr. Smith was like when he broke Thatcher Owen?"

Mr. Boyd shut his eyes, remembering vividly the moment at which he had witnessed the prisoner go white with shock as he realized that he had walked blithely into Layle Smith's trap. "He's subtle."

"Far too subtle. He could utterly destroy the *Code of Seeking*, and nobody would realize it until it was too late. Right now, we are relatively safe from him, because he is showing us the blade of his power. It's when he stops showing his blade that the real danger will begin."

"And some junior guards and Seekers are fools enough to think he has no blade." Barrett thumped the table with frustration as he opened his eyes.

The neighboring quarters were beginning to reverberate with sound as its inhabitants rose with the approach of the dusk shift, but the sound came faintly to Barrett's ears, like the surge of a wave beginning to gather strength. "Mr. Sobel, why did we ever allow a man like that to become our High Seeker?"

"Because he is a genius." Mr. Sobel's response was soft. "He is a genius, and a high visionary. When Mr. Smith wrote the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*, it had to be approved by the Guild of Magistrates. I was present at the reading; I saw a group of hardened, phlegmatic men reduced to tears as they heard the words he had written about rebirth. And he has lived out those words in his work with the prisoners here. At his best, no one can surpass him as a model for humane treatment of prisoners. He is like an incarnation of the goddess Mercy."

"And at his worst, he is Hell." Barrett ran his fingers through his hair, trying to think straight. "What can we do?"

Mr. Sobel pushed the dagger over to Barrett. "Aside from praying? Look to his mind's health."

Barrett, who had been about to sheathe his dagger, flicked his gaze up to the other guard. "You think he is in danger of going mad again?" he said softly.

"At the moment, no. But that doesn't mean his mind is healthy. Mr. Boyd, whatever Mr. Bergsen may say publicly about the High Seeker being cured of his madness, he knows as well as the Codifier and the Record-keeper and anyone else who has worked closely with the High Seeker that Layle Smith is never entirely right in his mind. He is a man who is perpetually unbalanced, but who has learned to control himself so well that he can do his work, and do it in a remarkable fashion. Yet he is always dancing on a knife's edge."

"Elsdon Taylor's love is what keeps him from falling off," Barrett suggested.

"Yes, to a large degree. Which is why the best thing you can do for Layle Smith – and by extension, this dungeon – is try to keep those two at peace

with each other. This present tension between the two of them is what is worsening Mr. Smith's health, more than any mockery he endures."

Barrett folded up the petitions before replying. "Mr. Sobel, I think you have a more exalted view of my role in this matter than the circumstances warrant."

Mr. Sobel's smile was wry as he rose to escort Barrett to the door. "Mr. Boyd," he said, "if there is one thing I have learned in the twenty-seven years of my career here, it is never to underestimate the role that guards can play in the life of the Eternal Dungeon."

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. . . All that was needed, it seems, was for a handful of prison workers to begin to doubt the foundational principles of their work; once that had happened, a revolution was set in motion. Or so it is often said by historians who take a superficial view of the origins of the conflict.

We may say, if we like, that it was obvious who was in the right. But we must remember again that the traditions of the Eternal Dungeon were military traditions. A soldier might decide, out of tender conscience, that it is wrong to kill in warfare, but if he has signed up for the army, he is expected to carry out orders. If he does not, he may reasonably expect to be shot.

What created tension in the Eternal Dungeon in 360 was therefore not the fact that some Seekers and guards began to question whether torture was the best means by which to question prisoners. We know that this had happened in past decades, and that the past questioning had no effect on how the dungeon was run. What created tension was the conflict Layle Smith found himself in – a conflict of his own making.

For it was Layle Smith who had encouraged the junior members of the dungeon to speak freely. It was Layle Smith who had permitted their greater participation in the decision-making. And it was Layle Smith who would now find that his high principles had been turned into a weapon against him as a new generation refused to accept his orders in the fashion of obedient soldiers.

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

On Guard 4
APPOINTMENT

Seward Sobel
The year 360, the eighth month.

Firearms: Usually forbidden in the Eternal Dungeon because, unless the gun is wielded by a highly skilled gunman, the close confines of the dungeon make likely the accidental shooting of innocent bystanders. The fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking* also notes that guns are the lazy man's method of restraint. *See* Sacrifice.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER TEN

"What the Queen will need from you . . ."

"Yes, sir?" There was only one thing Seward hated more than torturing a prisoner or handing him over to be executed.

". . . is a detailed list of all the guards, with notes on their performance levels and their rates of pay."

Triplicate forms. Bloody blades, it was enough to make him seek a new profession. "Couldn't the Record-keeper provide her with that information, sir?" he asked hopefully.

"The Record-keeper is burdened with his own special duties at the moment, Mr. Sobel."

The faint warning note in the High Seeker's voice caused Seward to dip his eyes. "I apologize, sir."

Layle Smith strode beside him in the main corridor during the dusk shift as they passed cells, and guards, and laborers shouting instructions to one another. The High Seeker added with characteristic generosity, "I'm sorry that you are carrying such a heavy burden at this time."

Seward gave a small smile. "At least I know that, as you reminded me, all of the dungeon dwellers are sharing this burden. Mr. Crofford told me that his prisoner recently asked, with great anxiety, whether he would be placed in 'the vise.' Apparently the prisoner had overheard Mr. Wyatt's laborers talking about the instruments of their trade, and had drawn his own conclusion as to their purpose."

"Indeed?" Mr. Smith made a manful attempt to keep his voice neutral, but he could not quite hide the longing in it. "What exactly was it that he feared, Mr. Sobel?"

Seward was still trying to figure out how to avoid answering this question – or perhaps even to find a way to convey to Layle Smith that this was not the sort of question that normal men asked – but at that moment they reached the door of Rack Room D. Seward, in an automatic manner, opened the door for the High Seeker and stepped back to let him enter

first. The High Seeker put his foot on the threshold; then he stopped abruptly.

Seward was beside him at once, ready to place his body in front of the High Seeker, if need be. But the intruder – or rather, intruders – were no assassins.

"Do you think he wants us to measure underneath the bench?" With his hair tousled and his hands covered with dirt, Mr. Crofford crouched in the corner, trying to push a yardstick under the stone bench that jutted out from the wall.

"How the bloody blades should I know?" The voice of Mr. Urman emerged from under the rack; only his backside could be seen.

"Gentlemen."

There came a thud and a muffled yelp as Mr. Urman evidently hit his head on the base of the rack. Mr. Crofford had already scrambled to his feet, dropping his yardstick in his anxiety. Mr. Urman, rubbing his head but with too high a sense of self-preservation to utter the oaths that normally would have accompanied this action, wriggled out from under the rack and rose to his feet.

"May I ask what you're doing?" The High Seeker turned his gaze from one guard to the other.

Even Mr. Crofford could read the High Seeker's displeasure; he turned as white as an electric lamp. Mr. Urman, whose reaction to bull-strong danger always seemed to be to wave a red flag in front of it, said crossly, "Following orders."

"Whose orders?" Mr. Smith's voice was as mild as sweet honey, which was always a sign of high danger.

"His." Mr. Urman pointed.

The High Seeker did not bother to look Seward's way. "I think not."

Seward decided it was time to intervene. "Who told you that I had given those orders, Mr. Urman?"

Mr. Urman shrugged. Seward supposed that he meant to look indifferent, but his shrug looked instead as though he were flinching away from a lash of discipline that he anticipated. It was Mr. Crofford who said, "Sir, Mr. Wyatt told us that a rack room needed to be measured. He didn't actually say . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Sobel, but I'm afraid we assumed from the way he spoke that he had already discussed the matter with you."

The High Seeker sighed, but contented himself with that. There would be no disciplinary beating, then; that was something. Not that the junior guards had violated the Code in any way, but the High Seeker did not like – he *really* did not like – having the rack rooms entered without his permission.

In his bleaker moments, Seward sometimes suspected that Layle Smith regarded the rack rooms as his private playground.

"Let that be a warning to you, then," Seward said quietly to the junior guards. "If an outsider hints he already has permission for you to undertake an action, he might have his own motives for suggesting that."

"Such as helping a prisoner to escape." Mr. Urman looked disgusted, but it became clear with his next words that his disgust was not aimed at Seward. "That was stupid of me."

"And me," Mr. Crofford added. "We're sorry, Mr. Sobel . . . High Seeker."

"I've made worse mistakes in my time," said Layle Smith, which was no more than the truth. "Did Mr. Wyatt inform you as to his intentions here?"

Mr. Urman shrugged. He always shrugged when being questioned by the High Seeker. Seward had never ceased to wonder at the High Seeker's ability to show patience in the face of Mr. Urman's continual insolence.

In recent weeks, Seward's wonder had turned to curiosity.

It was Mr. Crofford who replied, "He said something about an electric rack, sir."

"An . . . electric rack, you say?"

Seward turned his attention swiftly back to the High Seeker. He might have thought the change in Layle Smith's tone was a product of his own

overactive imagination. There was no mistaking, though, the change in Mr. Smith's posture. The High Seeker, normally the most stiff and formal of men, had relaxed. He looked like a pleased child who has just sighted a new toy.

Out of the corner of his eye, Seward saw Mr. Urman shudder. No, it was not Seward's imagination that a change had taken place in this room.

"Electricity is applied to the prisoner's body?" the High Seeker asked in the same matter-of-fact manner in which he always discussed the prisoners' torment.

"Er . . . no, sir." Mr. Crofford was looking uneasy too. "It is applied to the mechanism." He scrabbled in his jacket and brought out a piece of paper in florid colors and yet more florid type. "He gave this to us because it has the measurements—"

Mr. Smith held out his hand. Mr. Crofford came forward and handed him the broadsheet, and then retreated swiftly, as though he had been feeding a copperhead. There was a silence, which no one dared break, while the High Seeker read Mr. Wyatt's advertisement. Then Layle Smith said, "This might be worth looking into, Mr. Sobel. If Mr. Wyatt's claims are correct, the electric rack runs more smoothly than a hand-driven rack. You know that many unintentional deaths have occurred in the rack rooms, due to sudden jerks when a rack-wheel is placed in a new notch. There are no notches in the electric rack – just a smooth, safe draw."

"Yes, sir," he replied. He wondered whether Mr. Smith had actually fooled himself into thinking that his keen interest in the electric rack lay in its safety features. The High Seeker's body remained relaxed as he read the broadsheet.

"Well," said Layle Smith finally, folding the broadsheet and tucking it into his shirt pocket as he opened the rack-room door, "we shall see. —No, Mr. Sobel, you may remain here. I need to speak privately with another Seeker."

Seward, who had been about to follow the High Seeker out, took a cautious look down the corridor. Mr. Taylor had just emerged from his prisoner's

cell. Seeing Seward's look of query, he nodded and patted his trousers pocket.

Satisfied that Elsdon Taylor was prepared to defend the High Seeker, Seward returned to the rack room. He was in time to hear Mr. Urman say, in an acid voice, "Well, isn't that nice? The High Seeker denies our prisoners the comfort of modern lighting and heating for years, because he says that machinery isn't suitable for this dungeon, but the moment he hears about a new machine of torture, he leaps at the chance to use it on the prisoners."

This statement was so filled with truth that, for once, Seward decided to overlook Mr. Urman's disrespectful speech. "Continue with the work here, then. . . . No, wait. You may take a break, Mr. Urman. Mr. Crofford, I would like to speak with you."

He waited until Mr. Crofford had followed him into the corridor; then he closed the door and looked to see that all was well.

There was no sign of disturbance. The only men who could be see in the dim, flickering light of the gas-lamps were the pairs of guards in front of each occupied cell, as well as two Seekers in quiet conversation with each other. Seward moved down until he could see along the corridor that crossed the main corridor, leading on one end to the Seekers' cells and the outer dungeon. No movement, except from the guards watching to see that no prisoner escaped this way. The door to the outer dungeon was locked. From the corridor of the Seekers' cells came the sound of clanks and conversation as Mr. Wyatt's laborers replaced the old furnaces with central heating ducts.

Seward stole another look at the High Seeker and his companion. Elsdon Taylor had his hands in his trousers pockets, seemingly in an idle manner. Seekers, being required by the Code to wear the same clothes as other prisoners, were denied the comfort of a jacket, despite the fact that the Seekers must enter colder areas of the dungeon than the prisoners did. As a result of his lack of a jacket, Mr. Taylor was carrying only a pocket pistol suitable for being concealed in the confines of his trouser pocket. The gun was powerful enough to stop an assassin; the Codifier had seen to that. But

what if Mr. Taylor should encounter a clever assassin who tried to trick him into looking away at the wrong moment?

Mr. Taylor had his back to Seward. Yet as Seward watched, the junior Seeker slipped his left hand out of his pocket and made a fist twice: the signal, used by Seekers and guards, that all was well.

How, by all that was sacred, had Mr. Taylor known that Seward had returned to the corridor? Seward shook his head. Five years before, the High Seeker had instructed Seward to offer the semblance of friendship to a prisoner who was proving difficult to break, in order to relax him sufficiently to allow the searching to continue smoothly. Seward, puzzled as to how to carry out this instruction, had finally set out with what he thought was a very clever plan: he had pretended to be a shy, awkward, uncertain guard – just the type of man that a sympathetic prisoner might wish to converse with, out of compassion.

Elsdon Taylor had seen through Seward. He had not only guessed that the man guarding him was acting under orders; he had also guessed that Seward's pretense was the truth. Under the semblance of confidence that his duty required him to display, Seward was actually a shy, awkward, uncertain guard, a fact that only the High Seeker had hitherto guessed.

Within four days, Seward had found himself babbling to Elsdon Taylor his doubts about the work he did.

Shaking his head again, Seward turned away from the conversation in the corridor. Elsdon Taylor was a very dangerous young man. Seward pitied any assassin who made the mistake of trying to attack the High Seeker while Mr. Taylor was on guard.

He returned his attention to Mr. Crofford, who had been patiently waiting all this time. A competent young guard, but he had a quality more valuable than that, from Seward's perspective: he was fully committed to his work. Mr. Crofford was showing himself to be one of that rare species of guard who chooses to spend his entire career in the Eternal Dungeon.

Mr. Crofford had been Seward's first choice for this mission. But to pick him for the mission would mean transferring Mr. Urman to another

Seeker, and right now, Mr. Urman was proving to be a valuable source of information about the mood of the dungeon dwellers.

Still, Seward had his doubts. He said, "Mr. Urman is your closest friend."

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Crofford tilted his head to the side, looking mildly enquiring.

"I need you to answer my questions truthfully," Seward warned. "I don't want you to let your friendship with Mr. Urman color your answers."

Mr. Crofford straightened his shoulders. "Sir, my duty to the prisoners comes before anything else in my life."

His duty to the High Seeker was more relevant in this case, but Seward dared not say that, lest he reveal too much. "What do you think of Mr. Urman as a guard?"

"He's one of the best men in the dungeon," Mr. Crofford replied promptly.

He had not said that Mr. Urman was one of the best *guards* in the dungeon, Seward noticed. He stored that away in his mind for future reference. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he's faithful to his duty, sir. And because the prisoners mean everything to him."

Not the information he needed. "What about his relations with the other dungeon workers? He doesn't have a good reputation."

Mr. Crofford hesitated before giving a half-smile. "Well, sir, he's rough-tongued. Most people don't like that. But he'd give his life for the Code – truly he would."

Seward's gaze wandered back to the figure of the High Seeker, standing silently as he listened to what Mr. Taylor had to say. Seward caught a word or two of Mr. Taylor's speech, and part of him that had been tense relaxed. Of course. He had underestimated the High Seeker again. Layle Smith knew well enough where his temptations lay and how those temptations occasionally clouded his vision. He was consulting his far-more-objective love-mate as to whether it would be a good idea for the dungeon to acquire an electric rack.

It was well known in the Eternal Dungeon that Layle Smith had only three intimates: his love-mate, Elsdon Taylor; the dungeon's day supervisor, Weldon Chapman; and his senior night guard. In the past, the chill distance that Mr. Smith kept from all other members of the dungeon had not prevented the dungeon dwellers from feeling a high degree of respect and even concern for him. After all, Layle Smith was author of the fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*.

Seward wondered how long it would be before that past good will eroded. He looked back at the junior guard by his own side. "Thank you, Mr. Crofford. You may finish your work in the rack room."

He followed Mr. Crofford back into the rack room. Then, just as the High Seeker had, he stopped abruptly.

Mr. Crofford had halted as well. He was staring at the broadsheet lying on the rack; the sheet was now covered with scribbled numbers. Mr. Urman – just emerging, with yardstick in hand, from the cramped confines of beneath the bench – came over and scribbled more numbers onto the sheet.

Seward finally found his tongue. "You continued the work here?"

"Finished," Mr. Urman replied shortly as he began to tot up the numbers.

Mr. Crofford said, "You could have waited till I was back, you know. Mr. Sobel said that you could take a break."

Mr. Urman gave a half-shrug, saying nothing. Mr. Crofford turned his gaze back to Seward and raised his eyebrows.

Seward looked silently at Mr. Urman for a minute. He was thinking to himself that diligence ought to be rewarded.

It was a shame that he would have to penalize it instead. "Mr. Urman," he said, "let Mr. Crofford finish here. I need to speak with you."

Mr. Urman's lips flattened, as though the High Seeker had applied that much-longed-for vise to them. He threw down the pencil and stalked out of the rack room, then waited in the corridor, arms folded. "Well?" he said. "What have I done now?"

Seward, after a quick glance toward the High Seeker, softly told Mr. Urman what he needed from the junior guard. Not surprisingly, Mr. Urman's expression turned from truculence to uncertainty, then to apprehension.

There was a long silence after Seward finished. Mr. Smith had seemingly completed his conversation with Mr. Taylor, but seeing his senior night guard engaged in conversation – and perhaps guessing at the delicate nature of that conversation – he waited patiently as Mr. Taylor turned to speak with his senior night guard, who had just come on duty.

Finally Mr. Urman spoke. "No gun, you say?"

"No," replied Seward. "The Codifier has already issued firearms to myself and Mr. Taylor. The *Code of Seeking* has such strong words to say against the use of firearms in this dungeon that he is reluctant to issue a third gun." In actual fact, the matter had been decided by the High Seeker, who knew of Mr. Urman's abysmal scores in shooting tests at his previous prison. But Seward had enough sense not to say this.

Mr. Urman did not reply at once. He was squeezing the back of his neck, as he often did when he had one of his bad headaches. Seward wondered whether he was remembering the episode that had led to those times of chronic pain. Seward wondered too whether he was remembering how close he had come to death on that day.

"This is a volunteer position," Seward emphasized. "I can seek another guard." An abrupt transfer of guards would alert the quick-minded in the dungeon that something unusual was taking place, and the very quick-minded might guess why the High Seeker needed a more committed guard by his side. Seward wanted to avoid that. But he could not force any guard to take on this role.

Mr. Urman seemed not to hear him; he was staring down the corridor, at where the High Seeker still stood, next to Elsdon Taylor. Mr. Urman said abruptly, "If the assassin looks ready to shoot the High Seeker, do I place my body so that his bullet will enter my heart? Or do I arrange for a lingering death, in order to distract him from his goal?"

Seward stared. This was not the reply he had expected. "You surprise me, Mr. Urman."

Mr. Urman took on his expression of familiar stubbornness. "I'm new to being an assistant bodyguard. I have to ask questions about my duties."

"That's not what I meant." Seward looked him up and down, seeing more clearly what Mr. Crofford had recognized in him. "I did not expect you to be so quick to volunteer for so dangerous a task."

Mr. Urman's gaze turned once more to the two Seekers standing in the corridor. After a while he said, in a voice so quiet that Seward barely heard him, "Being a hero – even a dead hero – would be a change."

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"Hoi!"

Seward looked up from where he was inspecting the weapons on the arms rack. It was mid-morning: the guardroom was abandoned, aside from a bat that had taken a wrong turn upon its return to the cave that dawn, and was now fluttering around the whipping pole, as though inspecting it as a likely new home.

Mr. Urman, dressed in his off-duty clothes, asked, "What are you doing? It's hours since the High Seeker released us from bodyguard duty. You should be in bed."

He was doing work that he couldn't do during his shift-hours, because he was too busy shadowing the High Seeker these days. "The same is true for you," he replied.

Mr. Urman shrugged as he walked forward. "Couldn't sleep. Nightmares."

"About the dungeon?" Leaning forward, Seward unlocked a cubbyhole and withdrew a dagger from it. He was the only guard who had a key that fit every lock in the dungeon; all of the other guards could only unlock their own weapons and cell doors. The locks had been a suggestion from the High Seeker, back in the days before he acquired an aversion to machinery. Before then, the arms had been kept all together in a storage chest that any guard could open. Within one week of his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon,

Layle Smith had demonstrated – with the assistance of a rather bewildered prisoner – how easy it would be for a prisoner to steal a key from a guard and proceed to steal the arms of every off-duty guard.

Seward had been the guard whose key had been stolen by the prisoner, on careful instruction by Layle Smith. Seward had received a nasty beating from the old High Torturer for that. He had never revealed this to Mr. Smith.

"Not the dungeon," replied Mr. Urman. "Those types of nightmares would be easier to forget." Without having to be asked, he picked up the clipboard next to Seward and drew a pencil from his jacket pocket. It was cylindrical, Seward noticed. Seward doubted that Mr. Wyatt had pressed a cylindrical pencil upon the unwilling guard; Mr. Urman always had a taste for novelty.

"Mr. Milz," Seward said. "Slight rust near the handle. Edge not fully honed." He returned the dagger to its cubbyhole.

"Will he get a beating for this?" Mr. Urman asked as he scribbled down the report.

"I hope not." In all likelihood, yes. The High Seeker seemed prepared to leap upon the dungeon workers for the slightest infraction these days.

"You know, I've been asking around about you," said Mr. Urman as he paused from his writing.

"Oh?" Seward braced himself. Mr. Urman's roots tapped deep, where gossip was concerned.

"They say that you saved the princess's life. Is that true?"

"It's part of the story." He had saved the princess's life. He had failed to do what he should have done. He sometimes wondered whether the Queen had offered to promote him as a reward for saving her daughter, or because she could not stand to see his face any longer after his failure to accomplish the more important task.

"Bloody blades!" The excitement in Mr. Urman's face sparked like electricity. "What are you doing down here, man? You could have asked

any sort of reward for that. You could be a lord now—"

Seward had been about to reprimand Mr. Urman for his language – the moment that Mr. Urman picked up the ledger, he had placed himself back on duty – but instead he burst out laughing. "A lord?" he said to Mr. Urman. "What would I do as a lord? Spend my days graciously waving my hand at servants?"

Mr. Urman grinned. "Not a lord, then. But you could have asked to be keeper of a prison. Why did the Queen send you down here?"

"Because I requested that as my reward." Seward unlocked the cubbyhole holding Mr. Urman's dagger and whip. Both were in perfect order.

Mr. Urman was silent a moment before he said, in a changed voice, "You like it here, then."

"Yes. Don't you? You've been here for five years. That's longer than most guards stay."

Mr. Urman was silent so long that Seward stole a look at him. The junior guard was staring, not at the arms rack, but at the whipping post.

"Aye," Mr. Urman said finally, falling back on commoner dialect, as he sometimes did in moments of stress. "Aye, I do. It's not so bad here as it is in the lighted world. I wouldn't go back."

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Seward wouldn't go back either, and not simply because he valued so highly the *Code of Seeking* and the High Seeker. Seward's ties to the lighted world had been cut too thoroughly for him to return.

That night, lying beside his wife, smelling her sweet breath and hearing the slight snuffles of his children in the nearby rooms, he remembered that final day in the lighted world.

He had left the lighted world – at least, as a full-time resident – on the same day that he acquired the peak of his fame. He had been the youngest member of the Queen's Guard then, so young that he had been delegated to the lesser duty of watching over the crowd rather than guarding the royal family directly when the Queen and her daughters came forward to accept

the annual obeisance of a select group of commoners at the Commoners' Autumn Festival.

One commoner had been selected badly, as it turned out. Seward caught sight of him drawing his revolver in the bare few seconds before it was fired.

Seward had that much time to act. The assassin, cleverly, had chosen the moment when the royal trumpets were shouting the fanfare of the royal family's entrance. Nobody could have heard Seward's shout of warning. And the man was on a hillock at the other side of the crowd from Seward – too far away for Seward to reach the assassin in time. Seward had no gun; he was dressed only in his ceremonial uniform, with a sword at his side.

He took one second to assess the angle of the assassin's gun – the man wasn't aiming for the Queen, it appeared – and then Seward made a flying leap onto the platform where the royal family stood, disarmed with one swoop of his sword the rifle-armed guard who mistook him for an attacker, and placed his body in front of the princess.

The wrong princess. He had misjudged the angle of the gun. The assassin fired, and the Queen's heir fell dead to the ground.

They said afterwards that the assassin would have killed the younger girl too, if not for Seward's alertness. Maybe so. What kept Seward awake at night was the memory of the Queen's heir: the sweet, generous, loving girl who would have served as a noble Queen.

Her younger sister, now the heir to the throne of Yclau, was capricious, cranky, and overly stubborn. Had Seward changed the entire history of the world, in making the wrong decision about who to protect?

He turned over in bed, huddling against the warmth of his wife, and forced himself to fall asleep.

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Sacrifice: The verb used most often in the *Code of Seeking* (other than variations on "to be"). All Seekers and guards are judged primarily by their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the prisoners. The

fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking* includes an appendix that delves into the difficult question of when sacrifice by a Seeker or guard would actually be contradictory to the prisoner's best interests.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

On Guard 5
MEDIATION

Barrett Boyd
The year 360, the eighth month.

I would like to dwell for a bit on what I believe is the most-neglected aspect of Layle Smith's background: his experience with the military.

For the sake of readers who are a bit hazy in their grasp of history (that would be all university students, judging from my experience teaching), let us recall that, in the middle of the fourth century, the Thousand Years' War between Yclau and Vovim primarily took the form of raids by Vovimian soldiers into the border areas of Yclau. The soldiers would invade small villages, seize any objects they considered valuable – money, jewels, women, boys – and then, if not caught and killed by the Yclau soldiers, they would retreat to Vovim, taking their loot with them. It was believed by the Vovimian soldiers that these periodic episodes of terror would force the Queendom of Yclau to cede territory to the Kingdom of Vovim – or, to phrase it from the Vovimian perspective, to return Vovimian territory which Yclau had stolen.

The fate of the women and boys caught in these raids was usually terrible. The soldiers would "play" with them for a time, and then either abandon their victims – miles from Yclau, with no food or money – or they would sell the women and boys to houses of prostitution.

When we realize this, we can understand why Layle Smith, in all his surviving writings on this topic, referred to his late father only with respect. Unlike most Vovimian soldiers, Layle Smith's father did not

abandon or sell the Yclau woman he had abducted; instead, he spent a good deal of money to set her up in a cottage on his property, he saw that her young son was given the beginnings of a good education, and he showered his mistress and his bastard son with presents.

What Layle Smith's mother thought of such tokens of affection from her rapist we do not know, but young Layle seems to have taken away two lessons from the experience. One lesson was that he must protect whoever he loved. The other was that the manner in which to do so was through terror.

This terror took a particularly hideous form when he worked as a torturer in Vovim's Hidden Dungeon, abusing the prisoners he periodically fell in love with. During his time in the Eternal Dungeon, thankfully, he seems to have learned to divorce his desire to protect the prisoners and his desire to destroy them.

But it must never be forgotten that Layle Smith's father was, in modern parlance, a terrorist . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Amnesia?" said Barrett. "You think that's what it is?"

Mr. Taylor did not immediately reply, since he was busy chipping out old wax from a candle-holder with the dagger he had borrowed from Barrett. Finally, when the holder was cleaned to his satisfaction, he replied, "It's not unknown, in cases where the murderer commits an act that violates his conscience. It happened to me."

Barrett started slightly as he took the dagger back from his Seeker. So used was he to thinking of Elsdon Taylor as an upholder of the law that he often forgot that the younger man was in this place only because he had committed a bloody kin-murder at age eighteen.

"It would fit the facts, I suppose," Barrett said finally, as he used his handkerchief to wipe off the remaining bits of wax from the tip of his dagger. "I would swear that Mr. Holloway was sincere when he said he didn't know how the bloody dagger came to be in his wardrobe. But why would he attack the younger Earl, who had shown him kindness when he was young?"

Barrett thought he could hear a grim smile in Elsdon Taylor's voice as he replied, "I've been asked that question myself, many times. Why did I kill my sister, who did me no harm, when it was my father who abused me? All I can say is that, toward the end, everyone like my father became my enemy."

Barrett considered this as Mr. Taylor carefully spiked a new candle so that it would be set in place in the holder. Barrett had met the junior Seeker walking down the corridor next to the Seekers' cells, wiping his hands free of grease because he had just spent an hour examining the dungeon's new heating system. "Wasting my time on pleasure activities," Mr. Taylor had commented apologetically, as though he had been born in a mechanic's household rather than being raised by a high-born father who had owned one of the largest businesses in the city. Elsdon Taylor forever revealed new layers to himself; Barrett wondered how the High Seeker managed to keep up with him.

"Who are the prisoner's enemies, then?" Barrett asked finally. "The younger Earl, because his father abused Mr. Holloway?"

"And perhaps any high-born man. Have you noticed Mr. Holloway's extreme diffidence?"

"It's hard to miss, sir," Barrett replied as Mr. Taylor blew out the taper he had just used to light a candle.

"I had the same diffidence in my boyhood. I told myself that I was a much lesser creature than my father. But part of me knew otherwise and raged against my father's attempts to unjustly humble me. So on the surface I was meek, while inside I was developing into a killer." Mr. Taylor stepped back from the wall, his eye on the flame of rebirth that he had just lit for one of his former prisoners. "It was so great a separation in my mind that I hid from myself the knowledge of the murderer that lurked inside me. Though I can't be sure, it seems possible to me that Mr. Holloway has done the same, making a murderous attack on the younger Earl because of the man's high-born status, and then hiding from himself the fact that he had committed the crime."

Barrett took a deep breath, his eye travelling over the hundreds of flames lit in this place for executed prisoners. They represented, he knew, only a small portion of the prisoners who had died due to evidence given by the Seekers. "Sir," he said, "if Mr. Holloway has committed the murders—"

"Murder," corrected Mr. Taylor without looking away from his prisoner's flame. "An attempted murder."

"If he has committed murder, sir, then is there any chance that the magistrates will sentence him to life imprisonment?"

Mr. Taylor shook his head as he turned away from the candle. "Not when he has been charged with an unprovoked attack. And the magistrates are not currently in a mood to ameliorate charges against any prisoner, as you may have heard."

"Yes, sir," said Barrett, inwardly cursing the power of the press to sway justice. "Then perhaps the Eternal Dungeon will be able to grant him refuge, as it did in your case? For this is surely a case where the prisoner

would be willing to make reparation for his criminal activity, through his labor here."

Mr. Taylor paused to stare at a black hollow in the ground, where prisoners' bodies were burned after execution. "The High Seeker has decided to end that custom. He says there is no mention of it in the *Code of Seeking*."

Barrett felt as though the lid of the ash-pit had just been lowered upon his stomach. It took him a minute to find breath to speak. "I hadn't heard that, sir."

"It hasn't been officially announced yet. He told me last night, when I discussed Mr. Holloway's case with him."

Discussed with raised voices, Barrett guessed, interpreting the levelness of his Seeker's tone. Even now, with Elsdon Taylor publicly opposing the High Seeker's policies, he would not directly criticize his love-mate in the presence of others.

"Is there no hope for the prisoner, sir?" He could hear the desperation in his voice.

Mr. Taylor kneeled down to stare at the blackened ground. "If he is found guilty, he will hang – unless I can prove that he is mad. Yclau law does not permit the execution or imprisonment of young children or the insane."

Barrett frowned. "Was that issue raised at your own trial, sir? You could surely have been said to have entered into a momentary madness when you committed your crime."

Mr. Taylor shook his head. "The magistrates are reluctant to release convicted murderers unless the prison's healer certifies that the prisoner is permanently insane. Mr. Bergsen could find no justification for making such an assessment in my case. This case is somewhat different, though, since the attempted murder has taken place so many years after the original act that may have sparked it – and Mr. Holloway's scar suggests that his brain may have been harmed fifty years ago, with the effects only now being shown." Mr. Taylor rose to his feet. "In any case, the issue may

be moot, as we are not yet absolutely sure that Mr. Holloway was the one who attacked the younger Earl."

Barrett's silence must have reached the junior Seeker eventually, for Mr. Taylor slowly turned his head. "Mr. Boyd?" he said cautiously.

Barrett sighed. "Over here, sir, if you will." He waved toward the table-ledge nearby, in front of the enormous glass case of leather-bound books.

The books were behind glass to protect them against the mildew that dungeon books were prone to acquire. Books elsewhere in the dungeon could be cleaned periodically, but many of the volumes in the glass case were too ancient for such treatment, having been transferred from the ruins of the previous royal dungeon. They contained the names of every prisoner – and in recent decades, every torturer – who had been buried in the royal dungeons.

Only the most recent volume lay open for use on the table-ledge. Glancing at it as he came forward, Barrett saw the name of the High Seeker's prisoner from the previous month, who had died on the rack, due to a heart condition that had not appeared in his medical records. In the far right column of the volume, in his characteristically bold handwriting, the High Seeker had noted the cause of the prisoner's death: "Killed by his Seeker."

Barrett wished he knew whether Layle Smith had written those words with sorrow or with pleasure.

Mr. Taylor carefully pushed the volume aside before looking down at the two documents that Barrett placed on the table-ledge. After a moment, he said, "The first list, I assume, shows the dates on which Mr. Holloway had his headaches. And the second list, with names and dates?"

"The dates are those on which murders occurred in this city that remain unsolved, during the past five years. Mr. Sobel suggested I petition for that list. The names are those of the victims."

Mr. Taylor scanned rapidly the list, which was a jumble of names, mainly that of commoners and mid-class folk, but with a few elite mixed within them. "You've marked the names of several titled men here," he said.

"Yes, sir. Their murders match the dates on which Mr. Holloway had his headaches."

Mr. Taylor nodded. "This is well done, but the evidence is still superficial. There are many dates on which Mr. Holloway had headaches but no murder occurred, and many dates on which a murder occurred but Mr. Holloway had no headache. The overlapping dates could be coincidence."

Barrett said nothing, but placed the third list in front of Mr. Taylor.

After a minute, Elsdon Taylor said, in a voice too level, "What is this, Mr. Boyd?"

"The other information you requested, sir. The names of Mr. Holloway's patrons, over the years. I've marked the relevant names."

After two minutes more, Mr. Taylor raised his right hand and covered his eyes with the tips of his fingers. He stood that way for a long time. Then he stepped back from the table-ledge. "Send a message to the magistrates, Mr. Boyd, and tell them that, in addition to the original charge, the Eternal Dungeon is charging Mr. Holloway with eight murders."

"Yes, sir. And the lesser prisons who investigated his patrons' deaths? Should they be informed?"

"Yes. I want a complaint lodged against those prisons, at the Guild of Prison Workers. The investigators should have made this link before."

"They could hardly have thought, sir, that a beneficiary would kill his own patrons. Only a madman would do that."

"I very much hope," said Elsdon Taylor as he turned toward the sanctuary door, "that the dungeon healer agrees with your assessment, Mr. Boyd."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rolling his pencil back and forth on the dining table with the greatest of ease, Mr. Yates smiled when Barrett had finished speaking. "Mr. Boyd," he said, "you'll forgive me, I hope, if I'm blunt: You're exceedingly naive if you've ever thought that Seekers are infallible."

Wincing, Barrett took a sip of his morning tea. "It's not that. Working under Mr. Chapman . . . Well, he never tried to disguise when he was puzzled about how to proceed in a case. But I always thought that, when it came to the Seekers with greater skills, men like Mr. Taylor . . ."

Mr. Yates shook his head as he pushed toward Barrett a basket of scones that were shaped like rings of rebirth. "Even the High Seeker has never claimed to be a Vovimian god. We all make mistakes, Mr. Boyd. And what of it? Just because the magistrates sometimes sentence an innocent prisoner to be hanged, does that mean we should abolish the magistracy? Shall we allow criminals to roam the streets at will because we're afraid to take the chance of harming an innocent prisoner?"

Barrett tore his scone in half. "Imprisonment is one thing. What we do in the rack room, though . . ."

Mr. Yates sighed heavily as he buttered his scone. No jam and clotted cream appeared on the table. The prisoners were not permitted those with their tea; therefore, neither were the other dungeon inhabitants. "Look, Mr. Boyd, you're making it sound as though every prisoner who walks into the Eternal Dungeon ends up on the rack. On the contrary, it's the vicious prisoners – the ones who have almost certainly committed murder or rape – who are placed there. Consider how it works. A prisoner disobeys a minor rule, such as failing to stand in the presence of his Seeker. The way the United Order of Prisons would like the world to think, we immediately rack the prisoner. You know that's not the case; the prisoner is sentenced to a minor punishment – up to twenty lashes, light or medium depending on his past history of being punished in the lighted world. Usually that's all it takes to keep a prisoner under control. —More tea?" He offered Mr. Barrett the pitcher as Barrett stared morosely at his empty cup. Barrett shook his head. Mr. Yates continued, "So then the same prisoner attacks a guard. Well, it's not unknown for an innocent prisoner to attack a guard in

a moment of panic. So he's only whipped at that point. Since it's a second offense, he receives forty to sixty heavy lashes. If you were an innocent, law-abiding man, and you were given sixty heavy lashes, would you immediately conclude, 'I should test my Seeker's patience, and risk being put on the rack'?" Mr. Yates shook his head as he sipped from his cup. "No, Mr. Boyd, virtually the only prisoners who end up in the rack room are the ones who are unscrupulous murderers and rapists. Ninety-eight point five percent guilty. I didn't pick that figure out of the ash-pit; it's the number of racked men who are subsequently sentenced to death by the magistrates."

"And how do you know that the magistrates are right?" Barrett asked, tearing his scone in half. "Have you followed the hanged men into afterdeath to determine their guilt?"

Mr. Yates smiled. "I said that the magistrates are fallible, not utter dunces. —Are you planning to eat that?" He pointed to Barrett's plate. Barrett, looking blankly down at his scone, realized that he had shredded the scone into a dozen pieces.

Mr. Yates laughed at his expression. "I must go; I'm due on duty. Don't worry, Mr. Boyd; all of us ask these questions sooner or later. You're just a bit later than most of us in settling matters with your conscience." Patting his mustache with his napkin, he reached over, scooped up the pencil, thrust it into his breast pocket, and left the table, whistling blithely.

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Abandoning the scone he had tortured, Mr. Boyd rose to his feet and looked around. This being the beginning of the day shift, the dining hall was largely abandoned. Even the water closet – usually the most popular spot in the dungeon – was sporting an "out of order" sign. Mr. Boyd saw Mr. Sobel – whose time of labor, like the High Seeker's, often lasted well through the dawn shift – enter the room. Mr. Boyd began walking over to him. Mr. Sobel was the wisest guard Barrett knew; no doubt he would be able to offer better answers than Mr. Yates had.

Then Barrett saw Finlay standing on a chair, waving his latest sketch in the air for Mr. Sobel's benefit: a drawing of a group of men shouting at one another. By the time Barrett reached Mr. Sobel, the other guard was

standing beside the table, solemnly examining the sketch as Finlay chattered on.

"—couldn't draw the fists right. See?" Finlay pointed.

"I see," acknowledged his father. "Well, I'm afraid I don't have the skills to help you. But perhaps the High Seeker would be willing to lend you some of his art books."

"Should I ask him now?" Finlay looked doubtfully at the table next to them, where the High Seeker was speaking in undertones to the dungeon's day supervisor, Weldon Chapman.

Mr. Sobel shook his head. "He's still on duty; I'll convey your request to him later. Besides, it's time for your bath." He pointed to the doorway of the dining hall, where a round-bellied woman stood, with two young girls holding her hands.

Finlay groaned, but after a stern look from his father, he clambered down from the table and trotted over to his mother, waving the sketch for her to see. Barrett hesitated, realizing that Mr. Sobel must still be on duty, but the other guard waved him into a chair.

Mr. Sobel himself did not sit down. He turned round a chair and rested his bottom upon the backrest, leaving Barrett to wonder whether Mr. Sobel was off-duty after all. Barrett glanced again at Layle Smith. Surely Mr. Sobel would not be following around the High Seeker if he had been dismissed from duty?

"You look tired," Seward remarked to Mr. Sobel, wondering how to broach the topic that was bothering him.

Mr. Sobel sighed and rubbed the skin next to his eyes. His gaze, however, remained fixed on the High Seeker. "It's been quite a night. On top of everything else, a prisoner decided to smash one of the supposedly unbreakable plates of glass that protect the new ceiling-lights in the cells. He managed to slice his wrists with the glass before his guards reached him."

"Sweet blood," said Barrett softly. "Is he alive?"

"Oh, yes. His guards moved quickly enough to prevent death."

"Is he the High Seeker's prisoner?" Barrett ventured. Mr. Sobel, he knew, was disinclined to take credit when he acted in an exemplary manner.

Mr. Sobel shook his head, though. "Mr. Chapman's prisoner. Poor Mr. Chapman. This will bring back the wrong sort of memories."

Barrett began to ask why, then remembered. According to Mr. Urman – whose gossip ranged farther than the junior guard's own time in the dungeon – back in the days when Mr. Chapman served as a guard, he had been the unfortunate man who had been on duty during one of the dungeon's few successful suicides.

"Neither episode was his fault," Barrett countered.

"Of course not. But the older suicide still looms in his conscience."

Barrett began to speak, then stopped. It had finally occurred to him that the suicidal prisoner who was on Mr. Sobel's mind was not Mr. Chapman's old prisoner.

"Seward," he said – one of the few times he had spoken the senior night guard's given name, for all their many years of acquaintance. "It wasn't your fault either."

Mr. Sobel gave him a crooked smile, glancing briefly his way before returning his gaze to the High Seeker. "So everyone told me at the time. But it keeps me awake some nights, knowing that a man is forever trapped in afterdeath, unable to be reborn, because of my careless talk to the junior guard."

"I'm not so sure about that," Barrett said slowly, leaning back in his chair.

Mr. Sobel's gaze snapped over to him, then quickly back to the High Seeker. "What do you mean?"

"You know that my father is chaplain at Parkside University." Barrett waited until Mr. Sobel nodded before adding, "He tells me that some of the greatest minds at the university today believe that the traditional interpretation of the ancient injunction against suicide is wrong. It is likely, they say, that the injunction against suicide was only meant to cover

cases where death was otherwise unlikely, and the suicide was undertaken for selfish reasons. So rebirth would still be permitted to, say, a prisoner who turned himself over to the authorities as reparation for his crimes, even though he knew that he would be hanged . . . or, as another example, a condemned prisoner who killed himself because he couldn't bear the thought of being hanged—"

"Have you said this to anyone in the dungeon?"

"What?" Barrett was startled; Mr. Sobel did not ordinarily interrupt other people. "No, I don't think so. Why—?"

"Then you will not do so. Mr. Boyd, that is an order."

Barrett stared at the other guard's stern expression for a moment; then he felt a flush of embarrassment enter his face. "Of course, sir," he said softly, glancing to ascertain that nobody was close enough to have heard him. The only possible exception was the High Seeker, which was hardly comforting. "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"The last thing this dungeon needs," Mr. Sobel said, equally softly, "is a group of junior guards who have taken it into their heads that the prisoners here would be better off if they committed suicide. Thank you for seeking to comfort me, but our job is to protect lives, not to worry about abstruse philosophical debates."

"Yes, sir." His face was feeling very hot indeed, though he could not help asking, "And if the university debates end up carrying over to the rest of the lighted world, so that everyone here eventually realizes that a prisoner who kills himself isn't necessarily denied rebirth?"

Mr. Sobel sighed. "I'm going to hope that such an event happens after our time."

He was looking tired again. Barrett felt regret eat at him for the additional burden he had placed on the High Seeker's guard. He asked, "Shall I fetch you some tea?"

"No, thank you." Mr. Sobel's gaze wandered away again. "As soon as I'm released from duty, I plan to fall into bed and sleep for two days."

"I see." A two-day break from duty for Mr. Sobel meant that one of the High Seeker's prisoners had just been executed. This had indeed not been a good day for Mr. Sobel. Seeking to lighten the mood, Barrett said, "If your children allow you that much time to sleep."

But it was the wrong remark to make, for Mr. Sobel replied quietly, "Yes. My daughters have been kept awake by nightmares for the past few nights."

"Oh." Barrett thought again of Finlay's latest sketch, and he winced.

Mr. Sobel sighed heavily. "My wife and I have been seriously considering whether we should move the children into the lighted world. Until this point, Finlay and his sisters have acted like normal children. But now . . ."

"You'd move out of the dungeon?" Barrett raised his eyebrows. By tradition, the High Seeker's senior-most guard always roomed in the outer dungeon.

Mr. Sobel shook his head. "Not me. My duties don't permit it. No, it would mean a separation from my wife and children, which is why she and I have been agonizing over this matter."

Barrett rose then, as though he were a gas balloon that had abruptly lost its ballast. "You look deathly weary; I'm sure the last thing you want is to be carrying on a long conversation. I'll drop by and see you in a couple of days, shall I?"

"I'd enjoy that." Mr. Sobel barely took his eyes off Barrett long enough to give him a nod of farewell; then he turned his attention back to the High Seeker. Mr. Smith was continuing to speak quietly with Mr. Chapman, who now had his head bowed.

Barrett turned away. Mr. Sobel was a family man, Barrett reflected. He did not deserve to be burdened with other men's troubles during the hours when he was dealing with family matters.

Besides, Barrett had just been forcefully reminded that Mr. Sobel was the High Seeker's senior night guard. If Mr. Sobel knew how deep Barrett's doubts went, he might feel duty-bound to report the matter to the High Seeker.

And so Barrett could not seek advice from him. That left . . .

His eye drifted over to a familiar spot: the place where, more and more during the past weeks, he had found himself sitting.

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As usual, the two of them were there: Mr. Crofford and Mr. Urman. The latter had evidently just come off-duty, for he was still in uniform. However, today a Seeker had joined the two guards. Barrett hesitated, but Mr. Crofford caught sight of him and smiled, and so Barrett walked over to join the group.

As he reached the table and slipped unobtrusively into a seat, Mr. Ferris was saying, ". . . was a real handful, I tell you. After two months, Mr. Jenson handed the boy over to me, saying, 'If you can survive him, your work will be worth it. I don't have the strength to handle him.' That was saying something, I'll tell you."

"So why was he so difficult?" Mr. Urman asked. "Too traditionalist to accept the innovations of the Eternal Dungeon?"

Mr. Ferris snorted. As usual, he was hooded, but the amusement was plain in his voice as he said, "Traditionalist? He was the most radical boy who ever walked through the gates of this dungeon. He questioned everything, and he accepted nothing that he was taught without testing it for himself. Every morning he would come to me and say, in a deceptively polite voice, 'Excuse me, sir, but I've discovered a couple of ways in which the *Code of Seeking*, in its present form, could be used to exploit the prisoners.' Then he'd rattle off a dozen or so complaints that he'd compiled overnight. . . . At first I made the mistake of trying to brush off his complaints."

"What did he do?" With his chin resting on his fists, Mr. Crofford looked wholly absorbed in the tale.

"Can't you guess?" Mr. Urman shot back. "He exploited the prisoners."

"He exploited the Code," Mr. Ferris corrected. "He'd take advantage of the Code to twist it into a weapon against the prisoners . . . but always stopped just a hair's breadth short of harming them. Oh, he was a handful, all right. My assignment was like trying to control a bomb-throwing anarchist; I

barely slept during the time we worked together. I've never been so relieved as the day when Layle Smith ended his period as a torturer-in-training."

"And now he's trying to keep the dungeon frozen in time," Mr. Crofford said mournfully.

Mr. Ferris sucked at his straw, even though his glass was empty – the sure sign of a former pipe-smoker who now lived in a dungeon where smoking was forbidden. "Ah, well, that always happens when one grows old. One day you wake up and discover that a new generation has displaced your own, and has its own ideas on how to run things."

"That's exactly how it feels," inserted Barrett. "As though this dungeon has been divided into two schools of thought: an old school that wants to keep things the way they are, and a new school that wants to move forward."

"And Elsdon Taylor is heading the new school," Mr. Urman inserted.

But Mr. Ferris was shaking his head. "You young ones shouldn't discount the value of tradition. Even Mr. Smith, when he was young, knew that he was building upon a treasure. He never went so far as to break the Code – that's important to remember. He's no hypocrite. He has always believed in bringing about change while abiding by the Code."

"But he's not even talking about change any more!" Mr. Crofford protested.

"Maybe not at the moment." Mr. Ferris abandoned the straw and leaned forward. "I'll tell you how I think things are. The High Seeker has had problems recently in keeping control over some of the guards. Junior guards," he added with a wink. "And some of the junior Seekers, like Mr. Newton, are too filled with a sense of their own self-importance to heed his orders. I'll make a safe prediction: Once Layle Smith has brought those young rebels to heel, this dungeon will return to normal. Until then," he added with a smile in his voice, "it's business as usual for us senior members. Isn't that right, Mr. Boyd?"

Barrett hesitated, wondering whether to offer an honest answer, but at that moment, Mr. Ferris looked over his shoulder and said, "Ah, High Seeker.

We were just speaking of you."

Barrett jumped in place, as though he had been touched by an electric spark, and then he hastily rose to his feet and turned to face Layle Smith. The other guards were doing likewise. Mr. Ferris followed suit at a more leisurely pace.

"Oh, dear." The High Seeker's voice was utterly expressionless, which was usually a bad sign. "Should I go away again?"

All of the guards tensed, but Mr. Ferris merely slapped Layle Smith on the back and laughed. "You have the driest sense of humor of any man I know," he told the High Seeker, leaving his hand on Mr. Smith's back as he turned his colleague around and began walking forward. "Did you receive the invitation for my seventieth birthday celebration?"

"I did," the High Seeker replied as he walked beside Mr. Ferris. "I believe that Mr. Taylor will be sending his acceptance. I fear that I cannot attend; I have too much work at the moment. I thank you for your kind invitation, however. . . ."

Their voices faded as they drew away. They were not quite far enough away, to Barrett's mind, when Mr. Urman said in an acid voice, "He always has a fucking cold-blooded manner of speaking."

Barrett winced; sometimes, Mr. Urman's commoner origins showed themselves all too plainly. Mr. Crofford, always willing to overlook his friend's vulgarities, said only, "He likes Mr. Ferris, though."

Mr. Urman emitted a sniff. "You mean, Mr. Ferris likes him. All that nonsense Mr. Ferris spoke about how Mr. Smith was just trying to keep control over a few junior members . . ."

"The High Seeker likes Mr. Ferris too," Mr. Crofford insisted. "Did you see how he let Mr. Ferris touch him? If any of us had done that, he'd have given us a look that turned us into blocks of ice."

"I suppose that age and seniority have its privileges." Mr. Urman dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand.

"No, it's more than that, if Mr. Ferris trained him," Barrett argued. "Training someone creates a link—" He stopped; Mr. Crofford was smiling at him.

Mr. Urman shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I've never trained anyone." But he did not look up as he spoke; he was fiddling with the dice in his hand.

Mr. Crofford voiced Barrett's thoughts. "Mr. Sobel trained you, D., and you're working with him again. How are matters going between you two?"

Mr. Urman simply shrugged. Barrett, watching the dice, said, "Game?" Generosity was what prompted his offer; dominoes was his preferred game, as it was for most of the guards in the dungeon. Only commoners – or men like Mr. Urman, who had been raised among commoners – played dice.

Mr. Urman shrugged again but shoved the dice over to Barrett. "No stakes," he said.

"No stakes," Barrett agreed. Even the dungeon's whist players – whose stake-games had been benignly ignored by the authorities for decades – had decided that it was wiser to adhere strictly to the Code for the time being.

They threw dice in turns, with Mr. Crofford keeping score; the game mainly went in Barrett's favor. Finally Mr. Urman said abruptly, "I think people are misjudging Mr. Sobel."

"Oh?" Barrett threw the dice, got triple nines, and threw again.

"Yes, everyone is saying that he shares the High Seeker's views, just because he carries out the High Seeker's orders. Well, I carry out the High Seeker's orders too, and I'm bloody well not on the High Seeker's side. We — That is, I think he's waiting for the right moment to make a stand against the High Seeker. Not yet, not over small matters like tardiness and drunkenness—"

Barrett looked up quickly from the dice. "Has something new happened?"

Mr. Urman looked over at Mr. Crofford, who said softly, "The notice went up in the entry hall an hour ago. Mr. Milz, Mr. Prosser, and Mr. Gamage

are being suspended for tardiness . . . and Mr. Raupp is being dismissed from employment altogether."

"What?" Barrett half rose from his feet. "Mr. Raupp is the most promising young guard this dungeon has! Was he really drunk on duty?"

He directed his question at Mr. Urman, but that guard said nothing. It was remarkable, Barrett thought, how Mr. Urman's willingness to circulate gossip ceased abruptly whenever the gossip concerned prisoners whom he himself had guarded.

Mr. Crofford, though, was able to supply the missing details. "The story that Mr. Raupp has been telling is that he attended a family dinner, the evening before last, which honored his great-grandmother's death and rebirth. He hadn't planned to drink, but his brothers urged him to join in the toast honoring his great-grandmother's transformation to a new life. He took just one sip and then set the drink down. It was only two-thirds of an hour past midnight, and he wasn't due to work again till yesterday's dusk shift; he was never even close to being tipsy. But he spilled some of the wine on his shirt, and the junior guard on the day shift smelled it when they exchanged shifts. The junior day guard reported him to the Codifier, and when searched, Mr. Raupp admitted to the High Seeker that he had broken the Code's rule against guards drinking on the same day as they are due for duty."

"Maybe the High Seeker didn't believe his tale," suggested Barrett, who was barely aware now that he had just tossed a throw that had won him the dice game.

"Mr. Raupp said that the High Seeker *did* believe him. He said that Mr. Smith told him, 'I'm very sorry, Mr. Raupp, but the *Code of Seeking* must be upheld.'"

Barrett swallowed down several curses before saying, "At this rate, there won't be any decent guards left in this dungeon."

Mr. Urman gave a sharp, humorless laugh as he frowned at Barrett's winning throw. "You think that's a coincidence?"

"What do you mean?" Barrett leaned back in his seat. The dining hall was empty now except for the three of them. Even Mr. Sobel had followed the High Seeker and Mr. Ferris out of the hall. From the direction of the kitchen came the sound of pump-water, the clash of the stoneware plates that all dungeon inhabitants ate upon, and subdued chatter. Straining his ear, Barrett thought he caught a scrap of the dishwashers' conversation. The outer-dungeon laborers were also concerned by this latest turn of events, it seemed.

"You just mark me, Mr. Boyd: The High Seeker will get rid of every man who opposes him and will replace them with workers who are willing to lick his boots." Mr. Urman scooped up the dice. "Another game?"

Barrett shook his head. His thoughts had drifted back to Mr. Sobel. Three suspensions, one expulsion, an attempted suicide, and an execution . . . all in one night. No wonder Mr. Sobel had looked tired.

Mr. Crofford said, "I'll play."

On the point of pocketing the dice, Mr. Urman paused to look at him. "You don't know how. I had to teach you how to score us just now."

Mr. Crofford smiled at him. "You could teach me the rest."

Mr. Urman fingered the dice. "Maybe. I'd like to— Well, that's something for us to talk about. Mr. Boyd, do you think you could possibly—?"

In the midst of what sounded like a surprisingly polite request for Mr. Boyd to depart, Mr. Urman shut his mouth. Mr. Sobel had suddenly appeared at the table. He gave a silent nod of greeting to Barrett and Mr. Crofford, then leaned over and murmured something in Mr. Urman's ear.

Mr. Urman growled deep inside his throat, but made no other protest. Mr. Sobel departed, as silently as he had come. Mr. Urman stood up and straightened his jacket and cravat, then checked the weapons at his belt. Barrett, looking in the direction that Mr. Sobel had departed, saw that the High Seeker was looming in the doorway.

"Another arrest?" suggested Barrett.

Mr. Urman made no reply to his question. He simply tossed the dice into Mr. Crofford's hands. "Here," he said. "I'll teach you later."

o—o—o

For a while after Mr. Urman followed Layle Smith and his senior night guard out of the room, there was silence. Mr. Crofford kept his head bowed, fingering the dice until Barrett said, "I'll teach you, if you like."

Mr. Crofford raised his head. His expression was so startled that it was clear that his mind was on something other than the bone-smooth dice in his hand. But after a moment, he smiled and said, "Thank you, sir."

"We're off-duty," Barrett reminded him as he took the dice. "And at the rate you're advancing in your work, you'll be receiving your seniority soon. After a few years, perhaps you'll have risen so high that I'll be calling *you* sir."

Mr. Crofford gave a wan smile. "Oh, I don't intend to apply for seniority. I'm content to be one of those guards who follows others' lead. Except . . ."

"Except?" Barrett paused in the midst of throwing the dice.

Mr. Crofford bit his lip, stared at the dice, and finally burst out, "It was easier being a junior guard before now."

Barrett's eyes nearly went to the doorway through which Mr. Urman had exited. Then he saw the dark smudges under Mr. Crofford's eyes and realized that the young guard's worries preceded today's events . . . though they had perhaps been increased by them.

"It used to be easy," said Mr. Crofford, his voice wringing misery from every word. "If you reported someone whom you believed had broken the Code, he'd get a fair trial. It was that way with Mr. Chapman: when he reported himself for beating a prisoner who had been trying to obey his orders, the Codifier and High Seeker took into account that Mr. Chapman's mind was in disarray because he had recently lost a baby son. But now . . ." Mr. Crofford took hold of one of the dice, and his hand clenched around it. "I don't know. It seems like the world has gone mad since Fae died."

Fae had been Mr. Crofford's fiancée, who had died on the eve of their wedding, in a most senseless manner: she had tangled her foot in her skirt while climbing a ladder to help her servants hang wedding bunting from an outside balcony. She had fallen hard, had hit her head on a stone, and had died within minutes.

Mr. Crofford, Barrett knew, had taken the death equally hard: even though two years had passed since the death, only recently had Mr. Crofford stripped himself of his mourning armband. Barrett said quietly, "I don't have the knowledge to help you with the latter problem, I'm afraid; I've never been engaged or even had a love-mate, however briefly."

"Really?" Mr. Crofford was startled out of his sable thoughts.

Barrett smiled. "Really. But as for the rest . . . The Seekers have always had the same problem, you know."

"What do you mean?" Resting his chin on his fists once more, Mr. Crofford regarded Barrett with a quizzical eye.

"Don't you realize that every Seeker who sends a prisoner to a magistrate is stepping on hot coals until he discovers whether the magistrate will give the prisoner a fair trial? Mr. Taylor's first prisoner didn't receive a fair trial: he was hung, although there were extenuating circumstances for his murder. Mr. Taylor told me that he was only able to comfort himself afterwards with the knowledge that he had done what he could for the prisoner: he had helped the prisoner enter into his transformation, the prisoner had made indirect reparation for his crime by seeking to help draw Mr. Smith from his madness . . . and so the prisoner was as close as any unrepentant murderer can be to entering into his rebirth."

"I see," said Mr. Crofford slowly. "So your advice is . . ."

"Keep your mind on your own work. Any man you report for breaking the Code may or may not receive a fair trial, but you've done what you can for the prisoners in this dungeon . . . and also for the breaker of the Code, who is facing his own need for transformation."

Mr. Crofford smiled suddenly: a vivid, sun-bright smile. "That makes it easier. That makes it much, much easier. Thank you, Mr. Boyd." He

scooped up the dice. "I'll sleep better tonight. Meet you for a game at the dusk shift?"

"I'll look forward to it," said Barrett. But as he watched Mr. Crofford walk away, he was left with uneasiness. Not merely about his own questions, which remained unanswered, but about the answer he had given Mr. Crofford. He had the terrible feeling that he had offered the young guard an analogy that was dangerously wrong.

For what if there were only one magistrate, and his judgments were always unbalanced?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Murdered?" Mr. Holloway's face had turned as pale as curd, and his hands trembled as he reached up to fiddle with his spectacles. He looked as though he would faint at any moment. "All of them?"

"I'm afraid so." Mr. Taylor was as gentle as a soldier breaking news of a wife's death to her husband. "You didn't know this?"

"I knew they were dead." Mr. Holloway's voice grew yet fainter, and his fingers fluttered on his spectacles. "My bank informed me that I wouldn't be receiving further payments from them. But I thought . . . they were old . . ." His voice trailed to a stop, and his eyes widened, as though taking in a new thought.

Mr. Taylor voiced the thought for him. "Sir, I have been in touch with the women's prison about these killings. Upon being questioned on this topic, your wife has confessed that she had heard of your benefactors' murders, but, believing that you had no part in them, she concealed the news from you, so as not to grieve you."

Barrett, who was standing near the junior Seeker, gave him a sharp look. Mr. Holloway's wife had also been the one who had decided to conceal the bloody knife, and had then changed her mind and persuaded her husband that they should inform the soldiers of the evidence. After eight murders and an attempted murder, had she begun to lose faith in her husband's innocence?

Barrett set aside the matter in his mind. He could not judge her actions; hers was not a comfortable position for any woman of virtue to be placed in. It might well be that her doubts had lingered for some time now, and only this latest murder attempt – with its clear evidence that her husband had been involved – had led her to break her silence. Even then, she had not spoken about the previous murders to the soldiers searching her until she had been directly questioned about them.

None of this, it appeared, was going through Mr. Holloway's mind, for he was shaking his head and saying in a sorrowful voice, "She has always sought to protect me, but she ought to have known that I would want to hear of the unhappy fates of the men who had shown me such kindness and

generosity. As it is—" His throat-ball bobbed as he swallowed. "You say that these murders all occurred on the nights I had my headaches?"

"Yes. Do you have any memory of what you did on those nights?"

Mr. Holloway shook his head. Removing his spectacles with trembling hands, he began to wipe the steam off them with his handkerchief.

"The last of these murders was many weeks ago." Mr. Taylor's voice remained gentle. "It's understandable that your memory of those times would be faint."

"I—" Mr. Holloway stared down at the glass lenses; he was blinking rapidly now. "It is not because I have forgotten those times. The murder of the Duke of Fincastle . . . that occurred on my birthday. I remember that day clearly."

"But not the night?" came Mr. Taylor's soft reply.

"No." Mr. Holloway's voice was shaking now. "No, all I remember is the headache. And waking up early the next morning because . . . because a stray cat had entered the house and found his way into the cold pantry, where we keep the milk. Either my wife or I had left the house's front door ajar, you see. Yet we were both sure we had checked that it was locked before we went to our separate beds."

Mr. Phelps – who had taken great care to keep his dagger sheathed when visiting this breaking cell for the past month – winced as Mr. Holloway completed his testimony. Only long training kept Barrett from doing the same. Hell-damned and hell-damned and hell-damned . . . every word that Mr. Holloway spoke provided evidence of his probable guilt.

Yet would probability alone be enough evidence for Mr. Taylor? For what evidence did they truly have? Only that Mr. Holloway could have committed the murder – not that he had, but that he could have. And the only evidence they possessed that he was of a murderous temperament was a single attack they had witnessed. Would that one attack be enough to convince Mr. Taylor of his guilt?

Mr. Holloway, polishing his spectacles over and over as he stared down at them, said, "I could not believe that I would undertake such an act . . . but I

would not have believed that I would use violence against a man of the law, and you say that I tried to attack your guard last month."

"Yes, Mr. Holloway." The junior Seeker now sounded as though he were consoling the grieving widower. "All three of us saw it happen. I know that it must be hard for you to trust the word of strangers . . ."

"No, sir." Mr. Holloway shook his head vigorously. "No, sir. I do not doubt your word. No man who had evil intentions toward me would have taken the trouble that you have taken to explore all avenues for my innocence. I . . . this is just a great shock for me. I don't understand how I could have done such a thing, and to such fine men." A tear escaped his control; he ignored it, polishing the glass so hard that Barrett felt sure Mr. Holloway would grind the lenses.

"I can understand that, Mr. Holloway." Still soft, still cradling his prisoner with his words. "I do not in any way intend to suggest that you deliberately set out to commit these murders. I have asked our healer to come and examine you. It may be that she will be able to shed more light on this mystery."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Holloway's voice was broken now. "Of course, I will be glad to be examined by anyone you wish—" His fingers tightened on the lenses, and in the next moment, they slipped out of his handkerchief, landed on the floor, and shattered.

Mr. Phelps stepped back in an automatic manner; several pieces of glass had shot in his direction. Mr. Taylor, more cool under fire, merely glanced quickly down to ascertain that none of the shards had landed on his trousers. "Please don't touch the glass, Mr. Holloway; you might cut yourself. Mr. Phelps, would you kindly fetch a broom and pan and see that this is swept up? Mr. Boyd—"

Barrett barely took in what he was saying. He was watching Mr. Holloway, who was staring at the glass at his feet, and whose breathing had turned rapid.

Barrett realized what was going to happen in the same moment that it happened. "Sir, back!" he cried, and reached for his whip.

Mr. Taylor – showing an alertness that would have saved him under fire on the battlefield – immediately took several steps back, but he was too late. Diving with inhuman speed, Mr. Holloway picked up a piece of glass and ran toward the nearest man, which was his Seeker.

Mr. Phelps immediately hurried forward to intercept the prisoner. Barrett let loose with his whip. Neither of them was in time. With a strangled sound, Mr. Taylor staggered back, his hands over his hooded face, blood seeping through his fingers.

Cursing, Mr. Phelps thrust the Seeker out of danger's way and turned to face the attacker. He had his dagger out, but there was no need. Barrett's lash caught the prisoner full on the back, and as the man screamed in pain, Barrett took three long strides forward. Repeating the same movement he had made five weeks before, he knocked Mr. Holloway unconscious with the hilt of his dagger.

There was a moment of silence, broken by the soft thump of Mr. Holloway's body hitting the floor. Guttural noises were emerging from Mr. Taylor, as though he were holding back screams. Barrett snapped, "Healer," and Mr. Phelps turned and raced from the cell, his dagger still naked in his hand.

Boyd took a swift glance at Mr. Holloway, duty-bound as he was to go first to his prisoner's aid. But Mr. Holloway appeared to be breathing, and Boyd was far more worried by the blood trickling through Mr. Taylor's hands. Taking the junior Seeker by the arm, he steered him through the cell door that Mr. Phelps had left open, locked the door behind them, and began to carefully pry Mr. Taylor's hands from his face.

Mr. Taylor did not resist this procedure, though he was trembling as hard as Mr. Holloway had before the attack. Barrett had a moment to be grateful for the dungeon's new electric lights. Mr. Holloway's breaking cell was located at the end of the dungeon next to the rack rooms; all of the cells nearby were cleared for renovation. If he had been at the entry-hall end of the dungeon, Barrett might have been standing in near darkness, trying to see in the soft, wavering light of the old oil lamps.

He glanced briefly down the rest of the corridor to ascertain that nobody was near – certain habits were hard to kill – before lifting the torn front

flap of his Seeker's hood.

Some guards, such as Mr. Sobel, treated the first sight of their Seeker's face as a matter of great momentousness. As far as Barrett was concerned, a hood was a piece of clothing like any other; under normal circumstances, he would have been no more moved to see Elsdon Taylor's bare face for the first time than he would have been if had first glimpsed the Seeker's bare arm. These were not normal circumstances, however. His breath paused as he took out his clean handkerchief and tentatively dabbed at the blood.

A minute passed before he could be sure of what he saw. Then he let his breath escape in a sigh.

"How bad is it?" Mr. Taylor, understandably, sounded more like a frightened schoolboy than like a Seeker. His eyes were screwed shut, his eyelids covered with blood.

"Only the healer will be able to say for certain, sir, but he missed your eyes. The wound on your temple looks shallow—"

But Mr. Taylor's eyes had flown open at his first words. "You've called for the healer?"

"Yes, sir." Barrett heard the puzzlement in his own voice. "Mr. Phelps has gone to fetch her—"

"No!" It was nearly a shout; Mr. Taylor had gone rigid.

Barrett stared at him; then, belatedly, he understood. Without a word, he turned to race after Mr. Phelps.

He was too late, though. By the time he reached the corridor that ended at the door to the healer's surgery, Mr. Phelps had already been intercepted and was pouring out his story – not to the healer, but to the High Seeker, whose stance was as motionless as that of the Vovimian god of hell, deciding which instrument of torture to use first.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Barrett had been in the Battle of the Wilderness. He had seen men blown to bits by cannon, mowed down by rifle-fire, explode into fragments by shells, and die long, slow deaths in the following weeks from dysentery, lung-worm, and other such diseases that ate out the insides of a man until nothing was left but a screaming hollow.

On the whole, he thought, he would rather be back on the battlefield than standing in the High Seeker's office.

All faint hopes he had held that he might have been summoned here from his living quarters in order to be commended for his investigative work on Mr. Holloway's past had died in the moment that he realized Mr. Sobel and Mr. Urman would be escorting him to the High Seeker. To be escorted by Layle Smith's guards was as good as having an eyeless hood placed over one's head as one was taken to a breaking cell. An escort meant he was under arrest.

Now he was in the High Seeker's office, standing in stiff formality with his arms at his side, chasing a dozen thoughts: At what point he would be ordered to strip down to the minimal clothes worn by prisoners. How to get word to his parents of his arrest. How to defend his lack of readiness in protecting his Seeker against a prisoner who had been charged with eight murders and an attempted murder.

That must be the reason he was here. He could think of no other way in which he had failed in his duty as a guard. Guards who failed to protect their Seekers usually received reprimands, not arrests – but then, he was not just any guard. He was senior night guard to the High Seeker's love-mate.

The High Seeker made him wait a long time before deigning to look up. He was sitting behind his desk, perusing Mr. Taylor's reports on his searching of Mr. Holloway. Probably, Barrett thought as sickness built in his stomach, the fact that he had failed to anticipate Mr. Holloway's attack on himself during the first day of searching would also be brought forth as evidence of his dereliction of duties.

The High Seeker finally lifted his head. Under the newly installed electric lights, his eyes looked brighter than ever, like two pools of green slime. "Mr. Taylor ordered a medium beating for the prisoner."

"S-sir?" He was taken off-guard and stumbled on this single word.

"Your prisoner attacked a guard – yourself – and your Seeker ordered that he receive twenty medium lashes for the offense. The Code calls for at least forty heavy lashes in such a case."

The sickness suddenly increased, to the point where vomit filled his throat and mouth. He was not here because he was under arrest, he realized. He was here to provide witness against another man who was under arrest.

He swallowed the sickness and said breathlessly, "Sir, the Code permits a lower punishment if the prisoner's body is too frail to withstand a heavy beating."

"The healer should have been brought in to judge that."

"The healer was busy with another prisoner when this happened, sir." He was on safer ground now. "In my capacity as the guard who gave the beating, I advised my Seeker against a heavy beating. Since Mr. Taylor is a junior Seeker, he deferred to my greater experience in such matters."

Layle Smith folded his hands over the documentwork, like a magistrate at his judging. "Mr. Boyd," he said softly, "it is mistake to characterize Mr. Taylor as someone who 'defers to greater experience.' We both know otherwise. Mr. Taylor defers to no one, where a prisoner's welfare is concerned. As his own report shows, he made the decision to give the prisoner a medium beating, and you backed his decision."

Barrett hesitated, unable to know how to respond to this entirely accurate account of what had happened. If he denied Mr. Taylor's account, then Mr. Taylor could be beaten for issuing a false report.

Layle Smith leaned forward. With a voice as liquid as molten iron, he said, "Your job, Mr. Boyd, is to place the prisoner's welfare above all other considerations. Too light a punishment can ultimately lead to loss of the prisoner's rebirth, which is what every one of us is striving for. Mr. Taylor

has, as you say, lesser experience than your own. Your own experience should have told you what to do."

He felt his back ache as he drew himself up further. "Sir," he said in a stiff voice, "I have served as a guard in the Eternal Dungeon for nine years. Five of those years have been spent as a senior guard. Before that, I served as a soldier in the Queen's army for three years, was promoted twice, and ended up as a guard in the unit for army investigators. I think I know under what circumstances it is proper to report my superior to a higher authority for breaking the rules."

Mr. Smith responded to this speech by shaking his head and leaning back in his chair. His fingers began to play with the silver letter-opener on his desk, rubbing up and down the flat of the blade. "Either I am not doing a good enough job of making myself understood, Mr. Boyd, or you are being willfully obtuse. I hope it is the former case, because the last thing I need in my life at the moment is a recalcitrant senior guard. Let me be clearer: You are not standing in this office because you failed to report Mr. Taylor's decision. You are here because you failed to overrule it."

Barrett's breath stopped in his throat. Before he could think of what to reply, the High Seeker leaned forward. This time the light glittered in his eyes.

"Mr. Taylor is under your care, Mr. Boyd," the High Seeker said, soft as a slithering snake. "If you do not understand what that means, I will spell it out for you. If you fail to overrule your Seeker the next time he makes a decision that endangers your prisoner's path to rebirth, and if it becomes necessary for me to order that your Seeker be beaten, you will be the man I order to apply the lashes. And if higher punishment should be needed, then your final act as a guard will be to witness Mr. Taylor's hanging."

A very long pause followed. The High Seeker did not move his gaze. Barrett finally managed to get his tongue detached from the roof of his mouth. "Sir," he said hoarsely, "you are speaking of your love-mate."

Mr. Smith's gaze drifted away to the papers under his hands. "I show favoritism to no one. Out."

"Sir—"

"Get out of this office, before I am forced to make threats against Mr. Phelps as well. Do not test my patience."

Layle Smith's hand was now gripping the hilt of the letter opener. Barrett, stumbling backwards, managed to get the door open without turning his back on the High Seeker. Then he stepped through, closed the door, and collapsed against it.

A hand appeared in front of his face, holding a handkerchief. Gratefully he took the cloth and wiped the sweat from his face. By the time he handed the handkerchief back to Mr. Sobel, he had managed to steady himself. He glanced at Mr. Urman, expecting to see a smirk on the junior guard's face, but Mr. Urman, standing to the left side of the doorway, was doing a good job of pretending to be interested in the Record-keeper, who was striking out the name of an executed prisoner on his tablet.

Barrett turned his attention back to Mr. Sobel, who was standing on the left side of the doorway. Wondering how much the senior guard had overheard, he said, "Mr. Sobel, he wouldn't— He must be—"

"Blustering?" suggested the other guard softly.

A shudder ran through Barrett's body. He felt his hands form into fists. "What do I do now?" he asked, as plaintively as a child.

"Deliver the High Seeker's message, I suppose," Mr. Sobel responded. Then, as Barrett stared, he added, "Mr. Boyd, you really don't think, do you, that Mr. Smith would arrange for you to be escorted here purely in order to scare you? By the time the dusk shift starts, word will have spread to the far ends of this dungeon that you were summoned to the High Seeker under guard. I think you should deliver the High Seeker's message to the proper person before that person begins to fear the worst for you."

Barrett tried to wipe the sweat off the back of his neck with his palm. "Mr. Sobel," he said, keeping his voice quiet, "matters have reached a new low if the High Seeker is using one of the dungeon's guards to deliver death threats."

Mr. Sobel's gaze flicked away toward the Record-keeper's tablet, filled with crossed-out names. "The High Seeker never delivers a threat to

dungeon dwellers unless he fears that he will need to carry it out," he said quietly. "Do you know why he believes he might be forced to carry it out in this case?"

Barrett wiped his sweaty palm on his trouser-leg. "Yes," he said bleakly. "Curse it, yes. I can guess."

"The life of a guard," said Mr. Urman, inserting his dark humor. "Now you get to serve as mediator between battling love-mates. Like I said, enjoy your job, mate."

o—o—o

Elsdon Taylor stood brooding outside his prisoner's cell. Since his arrival in the dungeon, he had grown into a tall man, about the same height as the High Seeker. He outdid the High Seeker in neatness. Somehow he managed matters so that his uniform was always perfectly in place: the shirt-knots all in a line, the belt-knot precisely centered, the boots so well buffed that one would have sworn that the junior Seeker had his own private boot-boy. Though perhaps, Barrett thought in a moment of insight, the High Seeker simply liked to watch his love-mate shine boots.

Now Mr. Taylor was biting his thumbs. At least, Barrett assumed that was what was happening to the hands gripping each other underneath the hood. It reminded him, forcibly, that his Seeker was still only twenty-three years of age.

The hood was a new one; it hid any sign of a bandage, but Barrett had been in the healer's surgery when the glass-cut was tended to, and he knew that this wound, at least, could not be troubling his Seeker badly.

Finally the hands slipped out from behind the cloth, and Mr. Taylor said, "This is my fault."

"Sir—"

Mr. Taylor waved away his protest. "For your ears only," he said softly. "You deserve an explanation. I had a fight with the High Seeker this afternoon over Mr. Holloway. I told him that I wouldn't permit Mr. Holloway to be punished for what had happened, regardless of what the healer may declare about his state of mind. The High Seeker pointed out

that the Code requires the use of the rack upon a second offense of this sort. I said that, if the author of the fifth revision of the Code – who most assuredly should have known better – had not considered the possibility of a prisoner attacking his Seeker and guard due to mental illness, then that was not the fault of my prisoner, and I wouldn't allow him to suffer needlessly, simply to satisfy a formality. The High Seeker ordered me to use the rack. I told him he'd have to hang me first."

Barrett sucked in his breath. "Sir," he said cautiously, "that remark was not . . ." He struggled for an appropriate word.

"Tactful?" The sadness in Mr. Taylor's voice was so strong that Barrett did not need to see his face to guess at its expression. "Yes, it was a blow between the legs. I know that ordering my death would hurt the High Seeker far more than if he were to spend eternity being tortured in the Vovimian hell. Yet he would do it if his duty required it of him."

Barrett decided that "safe" was the word he had been searching for. "I find that hard to believe, sir." He tried to make his response sound convincing.

"We both would." Mr. Taylor's voice was firm. "Mr. Boyd, you haven't taken the oath of eternal commitment; you don't understand how it is for us Seekers. 'I am willing to suffer for the sake of the prisoners' – that is what we all swear, and by this, we not only mean that we are willing to suffer with our own bodies. We also mean that we are willing to sacrifice what is dearest to us, if need be. The High Seeker and I agreed upon that when we first became love-mates – we agreed that if we ever faced the choice between the welfare of a prisoner and the welfare of one of us, the prisoner must come first."

Barrett was remembering now why he had decided never to try to earn the right to become a Seeker. It wasn't simply that he was ill-qualified for the role; it was that all Seekers were lunatics. Functioning lunatics, yes, but something vital had been cut out of them – their hearts, perhaps.

Mr. Taylor continued, "It's the same for me. Even though I know that it would tear the High Seeker's soul apart to punish me, I can't allow that to stand in the way of what I believe is right. That's why I refused to follow his order."

Barrett sighed. Faintly behind the door – too faintly to be clearly discerned, for breaking-cell doors were thick – he could hear the high, light voice of the healer, questioning Mr. Holloway. "And this is the High Seeker's reply to what you said."

Mr. Taylor nodded. "He is telling me that, if I disobey his order, my senior night guard will be the one to pay the price."

Only Elsdon Taylor, Barrett thought, could have characterized his own death in such a manner. Barrett ran his fingers through his hair, trying not to be distracted by his growing realization that his entire interview with the High Seeker had been a sham.

Mr. Taylor had submitted his report about Mr. Holloway's first attack how long ago? Two months? It was unlikely that the High Seeker had waited two months to read a report on an attack committed by the prisoner of his love-mate. Yet Layle Smith had waited two months before summoning Barrett to his office. Had the High Seeker actually stated that Elsdon Taylor should have ordered forty heavy strokes for the prisoner? Thinking back on the interview, Barrett could not remember a moment at which Mr. Smith had explicitly made that statement. He had simply allowed Barrett to think that this was the source of his anger. Yet, as the High Seeker himself had tacitly acknowledged, the Code permitted a lower punishment.

Barrett sighed. The High Seeker, he now realized, had never really cared whether Elsdon Taylor had ordered twenty medium strokes. He had simply used that incident as an excuse to have Barrett deliver a message to Mr. Taylor about the racking. And Barrett, falling for the High Seeker's trick as smoothly as any naive prisoner, had delivered the message.

Well, it was a message that he would have delivered in any case, if the High Seeker had been so courteous as to ask him. There was no way in all the Queendom of Yclau that Barrett was going to allow his Seeker to be hanged.

"Sir," he said carefully, "I would prefer not to see my career destroyed." He paused to let Mr. Taylor absorb this. "More importantly, though, I would prefer not to see this dungeon destroyed. You say that you vowed to suffer for the prisoners – do you mean all of the prisoners, or just this one?"

Mr. Taylor began to speak, and then hesitated, evidently seeing what came next.

Barrett pressed his point home. "Sir, if you refuse to rack this one prisoner, all that will happen is that Mr. Holloway will be transferred to another Seeker who will rack him, and you will be executed. And the High Seeker, in all likelihood, will go mad again. Without you at his side, can you be certain that he will be able to hold himself back this time from destroying the Eternal Dungeon?"

Elsdon Taylor covered his face. Not simply his eyes; he placed his palms over his face. With muffled words, he said, "I cannot harm a prisoner in order to prevent a greater harm from occurring. Any Seeker could use that excuse to commit atrocities. The Vovimian torturers claim that they are preserving the King's peace when they abuse their prisoners."

Barrett wondered how Seekers managed to continue to break their prisoners when they saw them in pain. He certainly did not possess that skill. "Well, sir," he said, drawing back from what he had said, "this may all be moot. It's plain to see that the prisoner isn't fit for the rack, either physically or mentally, and so the healer—"

As though summoned, there came a tap on the door. Barrett checked the door's eyehole to be sure that Mr. Holloway was standing well away from the exit, and then he unlocked and opened the door to allow the healer to depart.

The healer was a brunette who wore her hair unbound, in the Vovimian fashion for women that Barrett's father had once described as "shameless." She was undoubtedly Yclau, though, with her pale skin and her elite accent that echoed that of the Queen's ladies. She was quite young, about the age of Mr. Urman. Barrett had felt nervous about leaving her alone with the prisoner, envisioning her bringing a scalpel out of her medical bag and inciting a murderous attack. She was slender and slight, with high breasts that looked – from a murderer's perspective – as though they were just made to have blood spattered upon them.

"Sir," said the healer, "kindly raise your eyes above my neckline."

Barrett felt the blush cover his entire face. Rather than raise his eyes, he dipped them, staring down at his boots. They were dusty and scuffed, in marked contrast with his Seeker's.

Mr. Taylor murmured a question, and the healer responded, "Well, he's in remarkably good health. I hope that my body is in as fine a shape when I reach his age."

Barrett raised his eyes in time to see Elsdon Taylor stiffen. The Seeker's voice was level, though, as he said, "He underwent greater than average pain when he was beaten."

"His back is not a good a place for punishment, no." The healer pushed a piece of hair behind her ear in an absentminded manner. "I'm afraid I can't authorize any further beatings. But the rest of his body is another matter. He has a wiry frame and a good heart and lungs. His family history shows no trace of heart disease or stroke or any other disease that might make racking him medically risky. Being purely cautionary, I would advise that you not take him up to the highest levels. Nothing above seven."

Level seven was only three levels short of the highest level. Mr. Taylor formed his hands into fists, and then released them, so quickly that Barrett barely saw the movement. "And his mind?"

The healer shrugged as she checked that her bag was snapped closed. "Borderline."

"Borderline?"

"Mentally well for most of his life, but with recent episodes of illness. I certainly can't certify that he would remain insane if given proper treatment."

"Madam," said Mr. Taylor, the levelness in his voice not quite so controlled as before, "if you do not certify him as insane, there will be no proper treatment. He will die in an execution room – or possibly on the rack."

The healer tilted her head, staring up at Mr. Taylor. "Are you advising me to issue a false report, Mr. Taylor?"

"I am advising you to place the welfare of the prisoner above all other considerations," Mr. Taylor responded. "I was under the impression that this was your job as a healer."

"Oh? Then you have received a false impression of the role of healers. My job is to place the welfare of our society first, and if I arrange for this man to be released, that won't happen." The healer's voice snapped like a whip.

There was a pause. Further down the corridor, in the direction of the rack rooms, a prisoner was screaming. Mr. Taylor said in a soothing voice, as though she were a hysterical prisoner, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

The healer sighed and made another attempt to push her hair away from her face. "Mr. Taylor, do you know why I am here?" She did not wait for a response, but instead added, "My younger sister died last year."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, madam." Mr. Taylor, whose own younger sister had died at his murderous hands, sounded genuinely grieved.

"She was killed by a murderer. Her purity was taken from her before she was killed, and her death is believed to have been lengthy – perhaps several hours."

Barrett winced. In a colorless voice, Mr. Taylor said, "And you came here in hope that you could assist the Seekers in bringing other such men to justice?"

"I came here to determine whether the Seekers have any sense of justice. You see, this was not the first time my sister's murderer had acted. He had killed in the past. When he was finally arrested and sent to the Eternal Dungeon, his Seeker argued in court that he ought to be released, due to his repentance for his acts. And he *was* released. Because this dungeon's healer had certified him as permanently insane."

The screams had dwindled to pleas now. A door further down the corridor opened and shut. Mr. Taylor said, "Madam, this is a terrible tale, and with your permission I will pass it on to the High Seeker in hopes that the Eternal Dungeon can prevent any such thing from happening again. Your sister's murderer ought to have been sent to an asylum for the insane."

"He *was* sent to an asylum for the insane." The healer sounded anything but hysterical; her voice was flat. "Houses of mental illness are not designed to imprison criminals, Mr. Taylor. A man who has broken into houses and killed without being detected is hardly going to be deterred by the sort of locks and guards that keep in ordinary men and women."

"If he had been sent to a life prison—"

"Matters would have been no better, for guards at such prisons are not trained to deal with the insane. Mr. Taylor, if you Seekers had any sort of compassion, either for the murderers or for their victims, you would put insane murderers out of their misery, in the same way that we put down a vicious dog who has begun foaming at the mouth. That is what is in the prisoner's best interests, sir, not releasing him so that he commits more crimes." The healer took up the side of her skirt with her free hand. "You will excuse me, Mr. Taylor. I have work to do today." She swept past the Seeker, her bag firmly in hand, and strode down the corridor in the direction of her surgery.

Watching her go, Barrett murmured, "And I thought she would be too soft to condemn any man to torture."

Mr. Taylor made no reply; he had turned to look at Mr. Phelps, who was hurrying down the corridor. As the junior night guard reached them, he panted, "I'm sorry for being late to my shift, sir."

"Delayed by the Record-keeper?" Mr. Taylor kept his voice as mild as he always did with his prisoners.

Mr. Phelps, who had evidently learned Mr. Taylor's ways, stiffened into the stance of a guard being reprimanded. "No, sir. By the High Seeker. He asked me to let you know that Rack Room D is open for use today."

Barrett bit off a remark about the precipitousness of Layle Smith. Such was the High Seeker's skill that he might have read the outcome of the healer's inspection from her prior demeanor.

Mr. Taylor was silent for a long moment. Nearby, Mr. Ferris had emerged from his breaking cell and was speaking in a low voice with Mr. Crofford. Mr. Ferris's senior night guard looked half asleep.

"Mr. Phelps, I confess to having a poor ear, where class is concerned," said Mr. Taylor abruptly. "I know that you are of the mid-class – what of Mr. Birchfield and Mr. Underwood?"

"Why, they're both mid-class too, sir," said Mr. Phelps, looking surprised at this turn in the interrogation.

"They have very clear mid-class accents, sir," Barrett said, having a better sense of what information Mr. Taylor was seeking. "The day guards are in no danger of being attacked by the prisoner, if your surmise about his motive is correct."

Mr. Taylor nodded. "Then from this time forth, Mr. Boyd, you will only enter this cell when Mr. Phelps or one of the day guards is present, and you will confine your visits to urgent communications that cannot be delivered by the other guards. On no account will you enter the cell alone."

"What about you, sir?" Mr. Phelps asked, relaxing as he grasped that he was no longer the center of his Seeker's attention. "Should one of us be present when you enter the cell?"

"I?" Mr. Taylor's gaze drifted past them, in the direction of the entry hall. "I am feeling rather unwell at the moment, I'm afraid. An after-effect of the attack, no doubt. I am going to take healing leave until further notice; I know that I can depend on the four of you to care for the prisoner while I'm gone."

"Yes, sir," said Barrett, and stepped out of Mr. Taylor's path. But Elsdon Taylor made no move toward the entry hall; instead, he turned and made his way back to the far exit of the dungeon, the one that led directly to the Seekers' cells.

Mr. Phelps stared after him. "By all that is sacred, what is he doing? I've never known him to ask for healing leave. He has continued to search prisoners at times when he was ready to faint from his sickness."

Mr. Phelps had kept his voice discreet. Barrett, glancing around to be sure that no one was within earshot, kept his voice equally discreet when he replied. "What he is doing, Mr. Phelps, is buying time for the prisoner."

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. . . But it must never be forgotten that Layle Smith's father was, in modern parlance, a terrorist, and that, like all idealistic terrorists, he must have believed that terror was the only means by which to protect his nation, his province, and his family. This being the case, we can see why, in the earliest days that Layle Smith worked in the Eternal Dungeon, one of his closest acquaintances was on record as saying that the young torturer's most dangerous characteristic was his desire to protect the prisoners.

It is ironic that the speaker of these words was Seward Sobel, who would help Layle Smith carry out his reign of terror in the year 360.

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

***On Guard* 6**
ADVICE

Seward Sobel
The year 360, the ninth month.

Senior-most guard: The guard who holds highest rank under a Seeker. Rank is determined by a Seeker's shift: if a Seeker is on the day shift, his senior-most guard is his senior day guard, while if a Seeker is on the night shift, his senior-most guard is his senior night guard. A senior-most guard is not only charged with restraining prisoners, but also with supervising any member of the dungeon who requires supervision.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Seward held the High Seeker's forehead until the retching had stopped and all that was emerging from Mr. Smith's mouth was vile yellow-green bile. Then, as Layle Smith sat back on his heels, Seward began to reach up toward the lavatory chain, but a weak gesture from Mr. Smith stopped him. Seward hesitated, still on his knees, awaiting orders.

None came. Finally, hesitantly, he raised his eyes to Layle Smith's face. It was not a face he had ever expected to see again. His decision, the year before, not to pursue a friendship with his Seeker – in a word, not to see Mr. Smith's naked face – had contented them both, since what they had achieved in its place was, in certain ways, as firm a binding as though they had become love-mates. A great man and his faithful guard – that was the tale of which ballads were sung. Seward had grown up hearing such ballads from his nurse, never guessing that he would one day live them out.

Nobody had told him that one of his loyal duties would be holding the great man as he vomited. Seward glanced over at the water-basin nearby, which had a newly installed faucet above it, but he dared not stir. Layle Smith looked as though he might keel over at any moment.

The High Seeker's face was paper-white, which would have been bad enough if he had been native Yclau, but Seward had seen his hands often enough, and even his bare arms on the occasions when he gave whipping demonstrations to new guards, and so he knew that the High Seeker was normally much browner than the average Yclau man, despite the fact that he had lived most of his life in lightless dungeons. "Partly my father's skin-color," Mr. Smith had once said when Seward asked. "Partly sun-darkening from my years as a street-boy."

Seward shied away from both thoughts. He handed the High Seeker the rag he had been groping for and watched as the other man wiped away the remaining vomit from the corners of his mouth. Cold eyes, tight mouth – Layle Smith looked the very image of a torturer, and a Vovimian one at that. Only his breath was unusually rapid-paced, but Seward had seen that often enough, when Mr. Smith tended a prisoner on the rack.

He wished he could be sure that the cause was not the same this time.

Layle had sat down on the floor now, his body leaning back against the rough cement wall of the lavatory. There was only one light in here, a flickering electric bulb that had been installed just this week by the laborers. It was supposed to be safer than the oil lamps that had previously lit the dungeon, but the shadows from it made the High Seeker look like some ghastly specter from a Vovimian myth: hollow cheeks, hollow eye-sockets, hands like claws. With one nail, Mr. Smith was picking at his sleeve.

"Did I ever tell you," he asked, "about my final murder?"

In an instant, Seward was covered in sweat. Layle Smith could still do that to him, after all these years. "Just before you left the Hidden Dungeon, sir?" he asked hopefully. Mr. Smith had recounted that tale once – the story of an attempted execution that had gone awry when the young torturer's conscience finally bettered him and drove him to seek out the Eternal Dungeon. It was a terrible tale, filled with torture and rape and a desire for death that was intimately bound with the other two acts . . . but it was not as terrible as certain earlier portions of Layle Smith's life.

Mr. Smith shook his head, and his hood slid askew as he did so. Seward, upon seeing Layle Smith's body jerk as they had entered the dining hall and had overheard the remarks being made by the dungeon inhabitants about the day's events, had barely managed to get the High Seeker into this room with the door barred before the High Seeker had fallen to his knees in front of the toilet, raised his face-cloth, and retched his guts out.

"Not that one," Layle Smith replied. "Not an execution – a murder. The final murder before I was caught and delivered to the Hidden Dungeon." His gaze drifted up toward the high ceiling, dusted with shadows, as though he saw something there. "It was my first – my only – murder of a woman. A girl, actually; she was no older than myself and was still a virgin. I don't know what her parents were thinking, to leave her in an isolated wing like that. Perhaps they merely imagined that nobody would dare to touch so distinguished a child. But I would dare anything in those days.

"At first I thought only to frighten her into telling me where her father was, so that I could torture him into revealing where he kept the key to the

guild's treasure. But her fear was so sweet – I had never seen a fear like it. Nobody had ever been afraid of me in the way she was. And when I finally realized where the nature of her fear lay – it took me some time to comprehend, for I was a virgin too – I could not resist committing the act."

Layle Smith's arms were round his knees now. His body was relaxed. His voice was soft as he stared at the ceiling and said, "I remember the supreme sweetness of her screams into her gag as I entered her. I'd never experienced such joy before. Oh, I had known what I was for many years; I knew my body's own reactions, and one doesn't live on the streets without hearing whispered talk of folks like me. But it had never before occurred to me that I could have more than the pleasure of going cock-high. I had not known that I could pursue my pleasure to the zenith."

His gaze finally drifted down. His eyes were steady upon Seward's as he said, "It happened again an hour ago, when I watched the prisoner dangle from the noose, at my orders. He trusted me, and that is why he confessed what he had done to me. He believed that I would show him mercy. He had trusted me so greatly, and had held such affection and respect for me, and there he died by my orders. . . . It brought back all the sweetness of my childhood murder. I reached my zenith and passed it."

Seward could not have spoken if a pistol had been placed against his head, with orders for him to speak or die. Behind him, faintly, he could hear the rumble of the diners as they discussed the news that had just arrived in the Eternal Dungeon, through the official announcement made by the Codifier. The voices were faint, almost like the whispers Seward remembered from his days as a young guard, when Layle Smith's predecessor had killed any man in the inner dungeon who stood in his way, with little consideration of whether justice was being upheld. But this news was far worse.

Layle Smith jerked his head in the direction of the voices. "They are speaking of me."

"Yes, sir." That was a safe enough response to make.

"They are saying I am heartless – that I have become what I was before I arrived here: an abusive torturer. And they don't even know what happened to me in the execution room when I saw the prisoner hanged."

Seward could not help but notice that Layle Smith had ceased to speak the prisoner's name. He was not surprised. He doubted that Mr. Smith would ever possess the courage to speak that name again.

The High Seeker leaned forward. All the relaxation was gone from his body; the veins stood out in his hands and his neck as he said in a low, urgent voice, "Tell me the truth, Seward Sobel. Have I become what they say? Tell me what I am, please." His voice broke on the final word.

There were many responses Seward could make, all of them truthful. He could say, "In trying to uphold the letter of the Code, you have broken its spirit." He could say, "Most of these men and women would willingly die out of loyalty for you, but you have driven them beyond where their consciences will go." He could say, "If you continue this way, not even the prisoners will be safe from you." He could say, "Even before this happened, Elsdon Taylor had begun to lose faith in you, and I have nearly done so as well."

Perhaps he would need to find some way to make these statements, all but the last. But if he said any of them now, he suspected, Layle Smith's mind would snap, and the High Seeker would plunge back into madness.

Perhaps that would be best; perhaps that was the only resolution to what was occurring. But Seward had been assigned to protect the High Seeker, and he could not bring himself to kill the man he was meant to guard.

So he said, "High Seeker, when you raped and murdered that girl, I'm willing to lay odds that you were pleased with yourself afterwards. And I'm willing to lay my life on the line that you didn't vomit afterwards at the thought of your bodily pleasure at what you had done." He gestured toward the ugly liquid in the toilet. "Sir, abusers and murderers don't have consciences – or if they do, they stop abusing and murdering. I can't guide your conscience, but I know that you have one."

Mr. Smith closed his eyes. He was still a minute before he opened his eyes and spoke. "There are flaws in what you say, Mr. Sobel. I had a conscience as a boy; I merely chose not to act on it. But . . . Yes, I think my conscience is a little healthier than it was in those days, or we would not be having this conversation. Thank you."

His voice had grown firm again, as it had been when he pronounced the prisoner's doom. Seward felt his stomach twist, wondering whether he had only made matters worse.

The High Seeker flipped down his face-cloth and rose to his feet, giving his body a long, languorous stretch. His tone was normal again as he said, "Thank you, Mr. Sobel; I very much appreciate your assistance. However, I wish to have a few moments alone, if you would not mind."

His voice held the firmness of an order. Seward automatically glanced toward the ceiling, toward the walls, toward any place that might prove an entrance to an assassin. But the walls here were of cement, the ventilation shaft was too small to crawl through and too long to place poisoned gas in, and so the only vulnerable point was the door, which he could guard from the outside. Murmuring an acknowledgment of Mr. Smith's order, he rose to his feet and turned toward the door.

He was not looking forward to what lay outside. For one thing, there was Mr. Urman. The junior guard had deliberately refused to escort the prisoner to his death. Understandable, but it meant that Seward would be forced to place him under discipline, which could only mean a beating for Mr. Urman. And Mr. Urman, he knew, would never be able to understand why Seward had beaten him. From the junior guard's perspective, Mr. Urman had shown tremendous restraint in not fighting Seward for the prisoner's life.

And then there were the other dungeon dwellers. There would be questions, endless questions, as to whether Seward backed the High Seeker's decision to execute a Seeker.

Seward had no mind for abstract matters of right and wrong. He had known, from an early age, that his best chance for rebirth lay in placing his trust in a good man or woman, and pledging his loyalty to that man or woman. And so he had served a succession of lieges: the Queen, the old High Torturer, and the High Torturer's successor, Layle Smith.

But was Layle Smith still a good man?

Seward finished closing the water-closet door and leaned back against it, feeling the sweat break out anew on his skin. Mr. Smith must be right in

what he had done. He must be. For if he was not . . .

If he was not, then Seward had just helped the High Seeker commit the most treacherous murder the Eternal Dungeon had ever known.

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Code of Seeking: The book which guides the consciences of all members of the Eternal Dungeon.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

On Guard 7
JUDGMENT

Barrett Boyd
The year 360, the ninth month.

Some accounts of the Eternal Dungeon have suggested that, in the year 360, a group of men rose en masse, united in their opposition to all forms of physical punishment.

Poppycock. Historians who believe this are projecting the beliefs of our own, enlightened age onto men who were products of their time.

Let us clarify matters by distinguishing between the different types of physical punishment in the fourth century.

Did anyone oppose physical punishment as a means to prevent further disobedience?

No. In the fourth century, the use of physical punishment as a means to keep control of unruly members of society was ubiquitous. Fathers beat their disobedient sons, schoolmasters beat their disobedient students, employees beat their disobedient employees, and so, following from this, guards beat their disobedient prisoners.

It is true that, around this time, concerns began to grow that certain types of beatings were too severe; at the very end of the fourth century, for example, the Yclau army banned use of the one-hundred-stroke beating, which had led to so many deaths. But even Elsdon Taylor, who had endured abusive beatings at the hands of his father, did not argue against the use of the lash as a means to control disobedient prisoners.

Did anyone oppose physical punishment as a means to dissuade others from committing crimes?

For the most part, no. The one notable exception is the Magisterial Republic of Mip, which banned executions at the time of its founding in the year 355, on the grounds that executions did nothing to deter crime. But even Mip reversed this stance some years later.

Did anyone oppose physical punishment as a means of obtaining information from prisoners?

Yes, but this was nothing new. For as long as torture had existed, a small minority of society had argued that torture was ineffective – that a man in pain will tell lies in order to escape pain. So when some of the members of the Eternal Dungeon began saying this in 360, few eyebrows were raised. The efficiency or inefficiency of torture was a longstanding dispute that would not be fully settled until many years later, when scientific methods were developed to judge when prisoners were lying under torture. By that time, the use of torture was no longer needed. Scientists had developed more effective means of force for obtaining information from unwilling prisoners – and more importantly, of forcing the prisoners into a belief that they should follow societal rules. "Forced therapy" is the latest of science's insidious means of changing the beliefs of prisoners.

But those means have been repeatedly banned by our nation's courts. The reason for this is that the dispute in the Eternal Dungeon in 360 was not over physical punishment at all . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He knew at once that something was wrong. Or rather, he knew that matters had worsened, for the dining hall had been growing steadily more subdued during the past month.

Now, though, the dining hall reminded Barrett of how the Yclau army camp had looked on the day that news arrived of a great defeat of their troops by the Vovimian soldiers. People were talking in whispers, huddling in corners, or sitting in groups at tables over untouched food.

Barrett did not want to know the news. In the absence of Mr. Taylor – whose healing leave would end soon – it was the privilege of the senior night guard to announce to a prisoner his upcoming punishment. Barrett had done so a short while ago, in the protective presence of Mr. Phelps.

Mr. Holloway had fallen to his knees and wept. Barrett had wanted to assure him that he would live through the ordeal, but he could not bring himself to do so. Even if Mr. Holloway survived the rack, he would endure three full days of pain beyond which any civilian could reasonably expect to endure in his life. And the end of it all would be death in any case; the evidence was so strong against Mr. Holloway that his execution was certain. Everyone who knew of the case agreed about that. The pain of the rack would provide nothing to the prisoner except an agonizing end to his life.

Transformation, reparation, rebirth – all these goals of the *Code of Seeking* now seemed stale hypocrisies to Barrett.

"Just confess!" Barrett urged him and left the prisoner to his weeping.

He had gone in search of Mr. Taylor, hoping that the junior Seeker could provide him with some insight on what approach to take in this matter, but Elsdon Taylor had not been where he should have been at mealtime, in his living cell. Since the Seekers' common room was currently undergoing renovation, that meant Mr. Taylor must be taking his supper in the dining hall, a room that Barrett had avoided as much as possible in recent weeks, due to the intensity of the gloomy gossip there.

And now matters had evidently grown worse in the dungeon. Searching for an oasis of peace amidst the latest horrors awaiting him, Barrett caught sight of young Finlay Sobel, sitting at an otherwise abandoned table and scribbling diligently at his pad. With a sigh of relief, Barrett walked over to him and said lightly, "A new drawing?"

Finlay raised his head. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark circles under his eyes, as though he had not slept recently. Silently he showed Barrett his drawing.

It was of a bound man, his head covered with the eyeless hood of execution. He was dangling from a noose.

Barrett's breath stopped, as though a prisoner had punched him in the belly. He raised his eyes from the drawing in order to return his gaze to the four-year-old. Finlay said, in a voice that shook, "Did he die right away from a broken neck? Or was he strangled? I wasn't sure. It makes a difference in how I draw the head."

"He died at once," Barrett said, with more reassurance than he felt. There was talk in Yclau of replacing hangings with the death squad, because hangmen did not receive the same level of training they had in the past. Too many hangings went awry.

Finlay nodded, apparently satisfied. Taking the drawing back, he began altering the angle of the head so that it was clear that the neck was broken. Barrett looked round the room. He told himself he was trying to catch sight of Mr. Sobel, who would assuredly want to know of this latest development in his son's artistic career. In actuality, he was trying to catch sight of another man who ought to be here at this time of day.

Elsdon Taylor was nowhere in sight.

Then he saw something that made him forget Mr. Sobel, Finlay, and the dead man recorded in smudged charcoal. He hurried forward, just in time to hear Mr. Crofford emit a sob.

"Mr. Crofford, what is wrong?" he asked, keeping his voice low, though all of the people at the neighboring tables seemed wholly absorbed in the news.

Mr. Crofford lifted his face from his palms. His eyelashes and cheeks were soaked with tears. "I didn't know," he said in a strangled voice. "I never would have reported him if I'd known."

Barrett's limbs turned heavy as an iron foundry's hearth. He sat down abruptly, turning his attention to Mr. Urman, who was standing beside the table, his hands formed into fists, as though he might have to fight someone at any moment. Barrett said, "Mr. Ferris?"

"Of course," Mr. Urman responded, bitterness like bile on his tongue. "Who else? The man who helped to train Layle Smith. The man who openly expressed his admiration for the High Seeker. A perfect victim for Layle Smith's sadism."

"Sweet blood," Barrett said softly. He thought an oath was forgivable under such circumstances, though he was struggling to hide his relief. Mr. Taylor had escaped the worst, but Mr. Urman was right: for Layle Smith to have executed his senior-most Seeker was very bad news indeed.

"I thought he would show Mr. Ferris mercy!" Mr. Crofford cried, laying his hands flat on the table as though he were a prisoner about to be cuffed. "It was only a matter of ten lashes' difference between what the Code required and what he did. How could I have known that he would kill Mr. Ferris over so small a matter?"

Heads were beginning to turn now, attracted by the hysteria in Mr. Crofford's voice. Barrett doubted that anyone had been giving great consideration to Mr. Crofford's role in this, but that might change if the young guard continued to berate himself in public.

Acting on impulse, Barrett reached out and placed his palm over the back of Mr. Crofford's right hand. It was clammy. As Mr. Crofford turned startled eyes toward him, Barrett said quietly and firmly, "It's not your fault. You did what the Code required of you; it is the High Seeker's judgment that is at fault, and no one will blame you for what has happened. Not in my hearing."

The last words tumbled off his tongue without thought; only when he saw Mr. Crofford's face change did he realize what he had said, and realize the implications of his statement.

He half expected Mr. Crofford to jerk back his hand. Instead, the younger guard searched his face, as though seeking something there.

Barrett felt something stir within him then, in the same manner that it had stirred when he had imagined Finlay as a youth. He opened his mouth and found that he could not speak. Feeling Mr. Crofford's hand move, he began to draw back, only to find his hand gripped by Mr. Crofford's.

The other guard had begun to blush, but as Barrett might have expected from what he knew of the man, Mr. Crofford did not look away. Shy Mr. Crofford might be, but he had never sought to escape from the consequences of decisions he made. Barrett felt another stirring, and this time it was on the exterior part of his body.

He was not sure how long this lasted, their moment of joined hands and eyes, before Mr. Urman, predictably, commented in an irritated voice, "If you two are through doing eye-latch with each other like two long-lost love-mates . . ."

Barrett half expected Mr. Crofford to blush harder; instead, Mr. Crofford bit his lip, as though suppressing a laugh. Giving him a quick smile, Barrett released his hand and said, without looking in Mr. Urman's direction, "Or just-found love-mates. Mr. Crofford—" He hesitated.

"Clifford," the other guard offered, the shyness returned to his voice.

"Clifford, how did this happen? Did Mr. Ferris try to hide his Code-breaking from you and his senior-most guard?"

Clifford Crofford shook his head, using a napkin to blow away the results of his weeping. "I don't suppose he thought he needed to," the guard said in a low, level voice that caused the remaining eavesdroppers to turn away in disinterest. "It mustn't have seemed to him a serious enough matter to be reported to the Codifier. He just thought the prisoner's insolence was great enough to warrant ten extra lashes—"

"*Extra* lashes?" Barrett said, struggling to keep his voice quiet. "You mean Mr. Ferris punished his prisoner *more* than the Code requires?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the door to the nearby water closet open and Mr. Sobel emerged. The dungeon's senior-most guard carefully

closed the door behind him and then turned over the sign that said, "Under repairs." The people waiting in a queue for use of the water closet responded with groans, but only lightly; everyone had more weighty matters in mind.

"Oh, yes, that's what everyone will say," Mr. Urman replied, rage full in his voice. "'Mr. Ferris abused a prisoner, so he deserved to die.' Mr. Boyd, don't you see that you and the others are snatching at the High Seeker's lure? He'll start with killing a Seeker who has given ten extra lashes. Then, when everyone has meekly accepted that injustice, he'll go after the Seekers who give ten fewer lashes. Your Seeker will be next, Mr. Boyd, you mark my words."

"Well . . ." said Barrett, unable to think of a way to counter Mr. Urman's prediction without revealing his own worries. With relief, he saw Mr. Smith's senior night guard walk a few steps forward and join them. "What do *you* think, Mr. Sobel?" he asked. "Is this the beginning of the end for the Eternal Dungeon?"

He regretted his remark the moment he saw the way in which the lines of worry deepened in Mr. Sobel's face. No doubt many people had been badgering Mr. Sobel to produce a statement about what had happened. He deserved better from his friends.

All that the other guard said, though, was, "I can't judge that." His gaze drifted back to the water closet.

"Bloody blades, Mr. Sobel!" cried Mr. Urman in so loud a voice that heads turned throughout the dining hall. "You were the one who named Layle Smith as Hell!"

Mr. Sobel said nothing. He seemed frozen in place, like an ancient monument. Following his gaze, Barrett saw the High Seeker, newly emerged from the water closet, looking at the guard who had apparently just betrayed him.

The High Seeker was the one who broke eye contact first. He turned away, walking swiftly toward the dining-hall entrance while the dungeon dwellers silently parted to make way for him, as they might for a hangman. He was gone before Barrett had drawn his next breath.

"Sweet blood," said Mr. Sobel in a strangled voice, and then he was gone too, running to catch up with the High Seeker, who was now making his way alone from the field where he had lost the battle of opinion.

"Well," said Mr. Urman, his voice suddenly defensive, "he didn't have to be so rude as to run right off like that."

Mr. Barrett would have ignored this remark on any other occasion. Suddenly, though, he felt sick at himself for all the ignoring he had done. By not acting against Mr. Urman before now, he had doubled the burden of the finest, most generous guard in the dungeon. Moreover, he had allowed a possible break to occur between Mr. Sobel and Layle Smith – who, whatever other punishments he deserved, did not deserve to be left with the false impression that his closest remaining supporter had become his enemy.

Barrett rose slowly to his feet. "Sit," he told Mr. Urman.

"Why the bloody blades should I—?"

"Sit," he repeated, in a voice that snapped like a whip. Mr. Urman sat down, his face truculent. Barrett leaned over him. "Mr. Urman," he said slowly, "you have a foul mouth, a foul mind, and a penchant for making trouble with both of the above. I can't cleanse your mind, but if you ever again speak to a senior member of this dungeon in the manner that you just spoke to Mr. Sobel, I will personally take you to the guardroom and, with the High Seeker's permission, I will give you the worst beating you have ever received in your life. Are you clear as to my intentions, Mr. Urman?"

The truculence faded to wariness, accompanied by a sliver of fear. Mr. Urman nodded.

Barrett turned away, his thoughts travelling beyond Mr. Urman and all that had occurred at this table. There were things that needed to be done in this dungeon, and he strongly suspected that he was the only guard left who could do them.

As he stepped toward the door, he caught sight of Clifford Crofford rising to his feet, confusion on his face. Barrett remembered then, but he did not

turn back.

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The stillest hour in the Eternal Dungeon was at sunset during the summer. All but a few of the laborers had left for the day, most of the day shift had gone to bed, and the night shift was at its work.

Barrett was at his work, but not in the usual way. Following time-honored dungeon tradition, the High Seeker was excused from duty until two night shifts after the execution of his prisoner. Elsdon Taylor, having successfully pled for an extension to his healing leave, was not scheduled to return to duty until the following month. Now, as the sun dimmed and the room grew dark, the two men sat at a table in the empty common room, talking in low voices.

Barrett, leaning against a wall, was facing them. Mr. Sobel was not; he was facing the room's single door. Barrett knew, without having to ask, that his own job was to keep an eye out for any unlikely danger that might approach the High Seeker from the other end of the room. He had figured out by now that Mr. Sobel was shadowing the High Seeker, and he could guess why. But for now, the greatest danger in the dungeon lay in the soft conversation between the two Seekers.

Hearing a word or two of what was spoken between them, Barrett said quietly, "It sounds as though they are reaching a compromise."

"That doesn't surprise me." Mr. Sobel, his body turned in the direction of Barrett, kept his eye on the door rather than Barrett.

"So no more fiery speeches from Mr. Taylor?" Barrett suggested.

"They couldn't continue the way they were going. The High Seeker would have had to take action against Mr. Taylor."

And Elsdon Taylor, it seemed, cared more for the High Seeker's good opinion of him than for his own principles. Barrett shifted uneasily.

"Not an easy choice," reflected Mr. Sobel.

"Choosing between Mr. Smith and the prisoners?" Barrett tried to keep his voice blank of all bitterness, but Mr. Sobel's gaze flicked his way briefly

before settling back on its watch, like a lighthouse keeper straining to see a ship that it expects to crash into the shoals.

Mr. Sobel said, "I had heard that you urged Mr. Taylor to make his peace with the High Seeker."

After a moment's reflection, Barrett sighed heavily. "Yes. I know that he's making the best choice he can. But I had expected . . . I had hoped that other Seekers would step up to take his place in speaking out against Mr. Smith's policy."

"No," said Mr. Sobel. Then he added, "Three guards have turned in their resignations."

"Is that the only choice we have? To resign our jobs or to resign ourselves to the High Seeker's policy?" Barrett strained to keep his voice low; he could still hear an occasional soft word between the Seekers. Layle Smith reached out and briefly, lightly touched Mr. Taylor's hands before withdrawing again.

Mr. Sobel's gaze lingered longer on Barrett this time. "You've been considering resigning."

Barrett nodded slowly. "I've been considering it for the past month. I was just on the point of turning in my resignation when this happened. . . ." His voice trailed off. He could barely see the Seekers now; no sunlight came now through the translucent stone in the ceiling, only cold moonlight, and nobody in the room had moved to light the lamps.

"I'd have thought Mr. Ferris's hanging would have been the final sprinkling of the death-ashes for you," Mr. Sobel remarked.

"It would have been . . . if I hadn't remembered that Mr. Taylor can't leave here. Even if he resigned as a Seeker, he would still be eternally confined to the dungeon for life, because of his oath of eternal commitment."

"You're a guard," Mr. Sobel pointed out. "You have the right to leave here."

Barrett shook his head wordlessly.

Mr. Sobel gave a small smile. "No, I didn't think you were the type to leave a mess for other men to clean up. But what will you do?"

"I don't know."

There was a long silence, unbroken even by the Seekers' voices; they had evidently travelled beyond need of words. The dungeon was still, like an old man dying, or like an unborn child. The room was cobwebbed in darkness. Barrett turned, found the wall-lamp and matches by groping, and spent a minute lighting the oil.

When he turned back, he found that Mr. Sobel was watching him. The High Seeker's senior night guard began to speak; then he changed his mind, and they passed the rest of the time in silence.

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. . . The reason for this is that the dispute in the Eternal Dungeon in 360 was not over physical punishment at all: it was over whether a man could be forced against his will to hold opinions he believed false. In a word, the dispute was over whether the use of force as a means for psychological transformation stripped prisoners of their humanity.

The first person to voice this opinion – in 356, four whole years before the crisis began in the Eternal Dungeon – was Elsdon Taylor. Ironically, the junior Seeker claimed to have arrived at this opinion as a result of speaking to a Vovimian torturer: the very man who had trained Layle Smith in the Hidden Dungeon.

The seeds of this change in worldview had been planted by Layle Smith himself, in his fifth revision of the *Code of Seeking*, in which he had urged Seekers to use alternative means of persuasion before resorting to torture. Yet it took Elsdon Taylor a very long time to recruit any other members of the Eternal Dungeon to his belief that force is never a legitimate means by which to transform a man's soul. So longstanding was the belief that force is a proper way by which to change men's minds that four entire years passed before any other members of the dungeon began to tentatively entertain the idea that perhaps, if they wished to transform the prisoners' souls, they should not place the prisoners on racks and threaten to stretch them unless they held the same viewpoints as the Seekers held.

Elsdon Taylor's senior-most guard at this time, Barrett Boyd, was the first senior guard in the dungeon to speak out publicly against torture in 360. Yet even he seemed reluctant to conclude that the use of force as a means of persuasion strips a man of his humanity.

The irony of this fact was not lost on later observers.

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

***On Guard* 8**
TESTING

Seward Sobel
The year 360, the tenth month.

Codifier's office: Usually refers to the small cavern west of the entry hall. Sometimes refers also to the antechamber preceding it, which is the province of the Codifier's secretary. The High Seeker's powers traditionally end at the entrance to the Codifier's rooms.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Nervous, Mr. Sobel?"

Seward, who had been running an automatic eye across all the laborers they passed in the main corridor, looked over at Layle Smith. The High Seeker appeared the same as he always did in public: cool and inscrutable.

"Well, sir, my nerves would probably be better if I hadn't seen an electric seat in operation," Seward replied.

The High Seeker gave a low chuckle. Only the High Seeker could have chuckled at mention of the electric seat. "I'd forgotten that you were the dungeon's representative at that failed experiment. The prisoner lived, as I recall?"

"Yes, sir. He received a pardon afterwards." Though what good the pardon would do him, Seward could not imagine. Ninety seconds of "electrocution" (as the newspapers termed it), while the palace hangmen tried futilely to get their new device of execution to work properly, was not calculated to leave a condemned prisoner in any bodily state worth living in. The prisoner had been sent afterwards to an asylum for the crippled, Seward had heard.

"Ah, well, no doubt Mr. Wyatt keeps his equipment in better order than the palace hangmen do." The High Seeker's voice remained light, as it had ever since his reconciliation with Elsdon Taylor in the previous month. "I remember one hanging I witnessed, several years ago . . ."

Mr. Smith's gruesome anecdote carried them to the end of the corridor and several yards into the entry hall, still crowded with laborers moving equipment back and forth. Seward glanced quickly around, but could see no sign of the electric rack, much less the generator and steam engine that ran it. "Perhaps Mr. Wyatt has reconsidered offering us the—"

He stopped; the High Seeker had waved him silent. Mr. Smith's head was up, as though he were a hunting dog. Then, in one of his lightning-quick moves, he turned and strode toward the west wall of the entry hall.

Seward caught up with him just as Mr. Smith reached the door to the Codifier's rooms and flung it open. A cacophony of hisses, whistles, and

screeches flew out of the rooms, as though released to freedom. Following Mr. Smith inside, Seward ducked under the low lintel, closed the door behind him, passed a group of laborers crowded around some object he could not see, nudged his way past the Codifier's secretary and guards – who trusted him well enough not to bar his way – and was just in time to see the High Seeker stop dead at the threshold to the Codifier's office.

Seward looked over his shoulder. Where once the waterfall had rushed down the wall unimpeded, now a waterwheel arrested its fall. Attached to the outer rim of the giant wheel were cups, catching the water and carrying it down to the pool where the Hooded Seeker Fish swum. The fish – normally as imperturbable as the Codifier himself – were swimming around in a frenzy, disturbed by the constant waves as each new cup dumped water into the pool.

On the other side of the room – not quite far enough from the water for Seward's liking – was the electric generator. Black and energetic, it hissed and screeched as it pumped its pistons back and forth, sending out hissing steam that nearly singed Seward when he took a step too close.

Standing in the midst of this all, with his suit damp from water spraying off the wheel, was the Codifier. He said, in a manner somewhat less level than usual, "I would have appreciated it, Mr. Smith, if you had applied for permission to make use of my office."

Layle Smith's sigh was audible under his hood. "I'm very sorry, sir. I'll have these objects removed at once."

"Do not bother." The Codifier turned to pick up a daybook, a pen, and a folded piece of paper. "The Queen has been urging me for some time now to take a leave of absence, to mark my thirtieth year in this dungeon. I had planned to wait until Mr. Bergsen was returned from his leave, but in light of the present need for my office, I will start my leave today. If you will allow me passage, Mr. Smith . . ."

The High Seeker, murmuring an acknowledgment of the order, stepped into the office and away from the doorway to let the Codifier pass. Seward stepped back into the secretary's room, unintentionally pushing back the Codifier's guards, who had been peering curiously over his shoulder. The guards snapped to attention as the Codifier paused by them and issued

them with orders to vacate the premises "so that the High Seeker may have room for his experiment." Seward began to slip past the Codifier in order to reach the High Seeker; as he did so, something touched his hand. A piece of paper.

He looked at the Codifier. The Codifier glanced at him, nodded, and then turned his attention back to his own guards.

Seward felt relief run through him then. He was not sure why he felt relief; danger still lurked in this room, hideous as a hangman. Perhaps his relief simply came from the fact that he knew where the High Seeker's special vulnerabilities lay.

As the Codifier and his guards and secretary departed, Seward caught sight of Mr. Urman, who was chatting with one of the laborers. At Seward's gesture, Mr. Urman came forward.

Seward showed him the note before slipping it into his inner jacket pocket. "Go let him know. Then close that door to the entry hall and stand outside. Don't allow anyone in who isn't authorized. If word of this should get around, we're likely to have half the dungeon inhabitants trying to conduct a rescue operation."

"Well, then, half the dungeon inhabitants aren't fools," replied Mr. Urman. "Why can't you or I be the one to test the rack? Guards are supposed to suffer for the prisoners too."

"The Code says that Seekers must be the ones to test new devices of torture." Seward's eye went past Mr. Urman to the crowd of laborers. As the crowd shifted, he caught a glimpse of a long, metal table. The legs of the table were elegantly engraved and razor-thin. Seward, who had bumped into enough dungeon equipment over the years to be able to envision the consequences of those razor-thin legs, winced, even before he heard one of the laborers give a shout of rage, followed by a curse.

"Watch your tongue!" Mr. Wyatt, who had been hidden in the crowd, came forward to reprimand the laborer.

"Mr. Wyatt, I want compensation. That bloody rack of yours cut my leg hard. If you don't pay me square for my healer's expenses, I'll see that the

Commoners' Guild pickets you—"

Seward did not hear how this confrontation ended, though he was interested by this sign that the new guild was making its power known in the workplace. Over the sound of the waterwheel, the generator, and the laborer's complaint, Mr. Urman was saying, "I don't care what the Code says. If there's going to be danger—"

Seward's gaze snapped over to Mr. Urman. "If there is going to be danger, Mr. Urman, you are not going to increase it by failing to do your duty. I need that door guarded. Can you imagine what would happen if someone charged into this room while the rack was in use and knocked into the wrong piece of equipment? Or if we had to deal with a gunman at the very same moment that the experiment took place?"

He kept his voice low, though all of Mr. Wyatt's laborers were now engaged in a vigorous argument over whether the laborer should receive his compensation, while Mr. Wyatt tried without success to regain control of the situation. Mr. Urman sighed, stared at the wall, and scratched the back of his neck. Finally he said in a low voice, "Well, the laborers aren't hidden assassins, anyway. I talked to them individually. They've all been working for Mr. Wyatt for years; their stories cross-check each other."

"Well done." Seward was mildly surprised, but only mildly. He was beginning to realize that, given the right work conditions, Mr. Urman would always go beyond the call of duty.

Seward looked again at the rack. Other than the nasty-looking metal legs and body, the rack appeared no different from any he had used in the past. It even had a wheel, though presumably the wheel was only used to regulate the level of racking, not to actually pull the chains that moved the top bar. The rack was a one-bar model rather than a two-bar model; the only moving part was the bar at the top of the rack, to which the wrist-straps were attached. The other bar, holding the ankle-straps, would remain fixed. That was good to learn; two-bar models were much more inclined to develop problems.

"Best fetch him now," Mr. Sobel murmured, and Mr. Urman, with a grunt of disgust, disappeared through the door to the entry hall.

Seward turned his attention back to the room. The labor dispute had been resolved; the men had returned to their business, which mainly seemed to consist of installing a switch box on the wall next to the rack. Seward did not like to think what the Codifier would say when he discovered that his secretary's wall had been drilled into. Some of the men were beginning to lay a line between the switch box and the generator in the next room.

"Mr. Wyatt!" called one of the men – a supervisor rather than a laborer, judging from his accent and the cut of his suit. "We can't lay the line along the walls. These cave-rocks are too jagged; there's too great a chance that the rocks would cut through the line."

Mr. Wyatt sighed heavily, as though the electrical line had entered into conspiracy with his men. "Place it on the floor, then, but put coconut mats over it, so nobody will trip over it."

The supervisor nodded and then said to the men nearby, "Go fetch the coconut mats, Wright. Flaherty, let's lay this line as close to the corner of the room as we can. Yes, that's right – lay it near to the wall, then along that wall, then along the third wall to the switch box. Keep it as far away from the rack as you can. Jimmy, don't forget to be careful when you switch on the electricity. You know how Mr. Wyatt hates to pay death compensations."

This brought laughter from the laborers and a frown from Mr. Wyatt, who was apparently unable to appreciate a joke at his expense. Seward waited two-thirds of an hour, until the line and the mats had been placed to the supervisor's satisfaction; then he glanced at the High Seeker, who was deep in conversation with Mr. Wyatt. Seward sidled up to the supervisor.

The supervisor shook his head, though, when he learned what Seward wanted. "It's not that I'm going to pretend that things couldn't go wrong," he said, "but believe me, we've learned from experience: it isn't safe to touch the prisoner if something does go wrong. Bodies conduct electricity to one another, you know."

"But if I had rubber gloves on—"

"Under such circumstances, the prisoner would be jerking like a live wire. It would be like trying to hold onto an eel – an electric eel. No, Mr. Sobel,

the safest way to save the prisoner if something goes wrong is simply to shut down the generator. We're trained to do so within two minutes of any crisis arising."

"And how long," asked Mr. Sobel, "can the prisoner survive under such circumstances?"

The supervisor gave him a quirk of a smile. "I wish I could tell you. But the truth is that this is a relatively new machine. We've only used it on monkeys so far, and an electrocuted monkey can't be expected to live as long as an electrocuted human. . . . That prisoner who was supposed to be executed by electricity managed to survive for ninety seconds. We'll just have to hope for the best."

Mr. Sobel murmured his thanks and then stepped away, wondering whether he should tell the High Seeker that this rack was even more "modern" than Mr. Wyatt had indicated. But at that moment, Mr. Wyatt said, "We're nearly ready now? Good. Mr. Smith, if you would care to begin. Ah, and this is your guard. Good, good. There's no need for him to turn the wheel – the wheel is really there only for show, for the electricity regulates it all. I will push the proper buttons myself. But I'm sure your guard feels privileged to be present at the unveiling of so wonderful a machine." He smiled at Mr. Sobel.

Seward made no reply. He waited until the moment when the High Seeker was sitting down in a chair in order to pull off his boots; then Seward went to the door to the entry hall and opened it.

Elsdon Taylor had just arrived. With his face-cloth down, his expression was hidden, but his body appeared to be as steady as usual.

"It's an experimental model," Seward warned him in an undertone. "It's never been used before, except with animals."

"Worse than we thought, eh?" Elsdon's voice sounded understandably grim. "Is everything ready, then?"

"Yes. The High Seeker is just preparing to lie down on it." Seward glanced over at Mr. Urman, who looked as though he wanted to kill someone, but who was nonetheless standing in guard position next to the door.

Mr. Taylor took a deep breath. Then he walked through the door, saying in a clear voice, "Don't bother to remove your boots, High Seeker. I'm here to take your place."

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The High Seeker looked up from reading the Codifier's note. Even with his hood hiding his expression, his stance was such that all of the laborers were staying very, very quiet.

"You convinced the Codifier to order this." Mr. Smith's voice was flat as he spoke to Elsdon Taylor.

"No, sir. I was the one who convinced him."

Everyone turned to look at Seward, who was trying to keep his spine straight. Half the job of being a guard, he had always told the men he trained, is pretending to be brave in the face of certain death.

"You, Mr. Sobel?" Layle Smith's voice was so quiet that even Mr. Taylor tensed.

Mr. Sobel took a deep breath. "Sir, you have a history of unfortunate interactions with machinery. And right now the Eternal Dungeon is in the midst of . . . matters that require your attention. The Codifier agreed with me that you could not be spared from your duties."

The water in the hour-clock nearby dripped methodically. Seward kept his eyes lowered.

Finally the High Seeker said, "We will have words about this later, Mr. Sobel." He turned back to Mr. Taylor. "Why you?"

"Because my healing leave doesn't end until tomorrow." As always, when fighting fiercely in battle, Mr. Taylor sounded calm and reasonable. "All of the other Seekers have prisoners assigned to them. I am the only Seeker who is currently free of duties."

It was as clean a blow as the junior Seeker could have made. Layle Smith's one weakness – if it could be called that – was that he would never act against the Code. The Code required that all active-duty Seekers, once they had begun a searching, continue to the end. The High Seeker,

believing that he alone would be testing the rack, had not thought to arrange that any other Seekers be free of their prisoners on this night.

It had taken Seward quite a bit of coordination between himself, the Record-keeper, and Mr. Taylor to arrange that Mr. Wyatt's demonstration should take place on the exact same night when the only two Seekers free of their searching duties would be Layle Smith and Elsdon Taylor. Otherwise, too great a chance existed that Mr. Smith would delay the rack-testing in order to "have time to select the proper Seeker," and would use that time to change the Codifier's mind.

Unfortunately, this was one of those times when the High Seeker was unlikely to appreciate the hard work that Seward had undertaken on his behalf.

"I must accede, it seems." The High Seeker's voice was frustrated and weary as he handed the Codifier's note back to Elsdon Taylor. There was another note in his voice too, but it was buried so deep that several minutes passed before Seward realized what the hidden emotion must be.

It was eagerness.

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A short time later, Mr. Taylor lay strapped to the rack. His voice sounded serenely unconcerned as the High Seeker checked his bindings, but Seward, who knew of the junior Seeker's past experiences with being bound, could guess that Elsdon Taylor was having to exert all his discipline to keep from screaming.

"How do they feel?" asked the High Seeker. He too was putting on a charade of indifference. Seward prayed that none of the laborers would be foolish enough to steal a look at Layle Smith's groin.

"Odd," replied Elsdon Taylor, giving a few tentative tugs at the metal manacles upon the slack chains. "I'm used to leather straps. Even in the Hidden Dungeon, I was placed in those."

A few of the laborers paused in their work, staring at Elsdon Taylor. Mr. Wyatt, unconcerned, said, "Set the clock higher on the wall – yes, that's right, so that we can all easily see the time taken during the demonstration.

No, don't worry about placing it near the switch; the clock is controlled by a battery. . . ."

The High Seeker's voice held a frown as he replied, "We had metal manacles for the racks when you first arrived at this dungeon, you may recall. You were the one who convinced me to change them to a less dangerous material. And even back then, our manacles were padded. To allow yourself to be stretched through the use of bare metal . . ."

"It's only a test, sir."

Suddenly, Mr. Wyatt was at their side. "We can of course custom-make the manacles in any material you wish. And any color too. Perhaps a bright pink would liven up the dull colors of this prison. . . ."

Seward turned his attention away. The wiring was evidently finished: a great cable snaking its way along the edges of the room, mainly buried the coconut matting. The supervisor of Mr. Wyatt's men had just finished connecting the cable to the switchbox on the wall to the left of the rack: the box was red, with a great, hand-sized switch, like a fire alarm. To the right of the rack, the doorway opened minutely as Mr. Urman peered in. Apparently satisfying himself that Mr. Taylor was not dead – yet – he closed the door again.

"Are preparations completed?" Mr. Wyatt asked his supervisor, who waved a hand and then ducked back into the Codifier's office, from which the sounds of screeching and cranking and splashing continued. "Good, good. Mr. Smith, if you would care to throw the switch . . ."

The High Seeker stood very still. Seward held his breath until Layle Smith said, in a voice much too level, "Thank you, but no. I am not skilled with machinery. I will stand back while you and your men do your work."

"Please stand *very* far back, sir." Elsdon Taylor laughed, but for the first time his laughter held a hint of nervousness.

"Very far back," the High Seeker agreed. "I will not interfere with the machinery. But I will remain in the room, in order to check that the experiment goes well." As he spoke, he slid back, as soundlessly as one of

the Hooded Seeker Fish, until he was in the far corner of the room, where some of the coconut mats lay piled.

Seward – accustomed at all times to surveying danger points – took a quick look around the room. In the southwest corner stood the door leading to the Codifier's office. Nobody could enter through there who was not already in the Codifier's office. In the southeast corner, another door led to the entry hall. Mr. Urman was guarding that, and by this stage of their acquaintance, Seward knew that Mr. Urman would guard the door to the limits of his ability. In the northeast corner, there was only Mr. Wyatt, the ticking clock on the wall, the switch, a small table with a dial-studded metal contraption on it, and Mr. Wyatt's young assistant, who had evidently been granted the honor of flicking down the switch. Seward took a closer look at the youngster's expression of concentration and then nodded, satisfied. The boy too would work to the limits of his ability, and Mr. Wyatt was close at hand should anything go wrong.

That left the northwest corner, the corner closest to the breaking cells, where the High Seeker stood absolutely motionless, like a connoisseur of music awaiting the first strain of a symphony.

If there was one thing certain in this world, Seward thought as he looked hastily away, it was that the High Seeker's attention would not waver from Elsdon Taylor as the young man was racked.

"Begin," said the High Seeker, so softly that the word might have been a mere wish, but Mr. Wyatt's young assistant treated this as a signal: he pulled down the switch.

Nothing happened for a moment except that the clock continued to tick. It was one of the modern clocks that did not bother to mark the time intervals except at the thirds. Fully a third of a minute passed as Mr. Wyatt fiddled with the dials of the rack's control mechanism. The dials looked like a miniature version of the dials at the Parkside Electrical Company, which Seward had toured upon its grand opening two years before.

Then Mr. Wyatt gave a satisfied grunt, and the rack chains began to clank as they moved.

They quickly grew taut. Elsdon drew in his breath audibly, then was quiet as the rack did its work.

"Mr. Taylor?" The High Seeker's voice remained quiet; his gaze was unmoving from the figure on the rack.

"It's smooth." Elsdon Taylor sounded breathless but otherwise calm. "Much smoother than our racks are. Are we past the first level yet? Usually there's a jerk when we reach the first notch of the rack's wheel."

"You just passed the second level," Mr. Wyatt announced, smiling.

"Slow the pace, please, Mr. Wyatt. It is important for the prisoner's safety that he not be stretched too quickly." Mr. Smith did not turn his head to address the department-store manager as he spoke.

Elsdon gave a throaty laugh that sounded tighter than before. "Actually, I'd prefer that this was over as soon as possible. You know why, sir."

So did Seward, and he was watching Elsdon Taylor anxiously; but there was no sign that the junior Seeker would panic as the manacles continued to bind his body to the rack. Perhaps, Seward thought, that was because of the unchanging shape of the metal manacles: they did not tighten around his wrists, as leather manacles would have done.

"Keep a moderate pace, then, Mr. Wyatt, but do not raise him above the sixth level," the High Seeker said, his attention still wholly focussed on the figure on the rack. "It is not necessary to raise him all the way to the tenth level."

So he said, but Seward could hear the longing in his voice. So could the watching laborers; they began to mutter amongst themselves.

"Quiet," said the High Seeker, and the laborers' comments cut off immediately.

"Code . . . requires . . . new instruments of torture . . . be tested to their limits." Elsdon was struggling to speak now.

"These racks have been designed to meet Vovimian specifications," Mr. Wyatt volunteered helpfully. "So we can take him all the way up to the thirtieth level—"

"No!" The horror and the longing permeated Layle Smith's voice. Then, taking hold of himself with that whip-cracking self-discipline which had allowed him to rule a dungeon of torture for twenty-two years without destroying its prisoners, he added quietly, "I said six, and we have reached that level." Mr. Wyatt blinked, evidently disconcerted by the High Seeker's ability to judge a level simply by watching a prisoner on the rack. "Slacken the chains, please, Mr. Wyatt. Mr. Taylor, you are the prisoner in this experiment; please do not attempt to argue."

Elsdon Taylor made no reply; from where Seward stood, he could see that Mr. Taylor was beginning to struggle to breathe. Seward took a quick glance at the clock; its minute hand had barely moved. A dangerously quick stretching, but there was no sign that Elsdon Taylor had undergone serious damage, and his greatest suffering – his fear of bondage – would be over soon.

Mr. Wyatt heaved a sigh, spun a dial, and the chains began to slacken. Stepping away from the control mechanism, he said, "Well, that is a great shame. If you were to see how smoothly this tool works at even the highest levels . . ."

As he spoke, Mr. Wyatt moved round the rack, his bulky frame blocking Mr. Smith's view. Frowning, the High Seeker moved forward in order to keep Mr. Taylor in sight, his gaze never leaving the rack. Thus it was that Layle Smith, the most agile and alert of men, tripped upon the power cord, which was peeking out from one of the coconut mats.

He did not fall, of course. The High Seeker never fell. But he stumbled, dragging the cord forward. Clearly irritated and too absorbed in his love-mate's ordeal to pay attention to so small a distraction, the High Seeker tried to shake the cord off his foot. This only resulted in him stumbling forward again. He did not notice that the power cord was thus being dragged out of its safe corner.

"Sir, no!"

Seward's shout of warning came too late. Dragged inexorably forward by the High Seeker, the cord reached one of the razor-thin legs at the bottom of the rack, and with a shower of sparks, the cord divided into two.

And with that division came a demon of death.

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Seward was never sure, afterwards, whether he actually saw what he remembered, or whether, as seemed more likely, his memories were drawn from the collective testimony of all who gave witness before the Codifier, with Seward in attendance in order to answer any questions the Codifier had about that testimony. Certainly no man could have seen everything that happened in that short time . . . with the likely exception of the High Seeker.

The sparks travelled with demon speed, up the rack leg and onto the frame. Seward did not see the exact moment when the electricity reached the now-slackened chains, but he heard Elsdon Taylor's scream.

And then there was no sound from the junior Seeker – only convulsion after convulsion as the demon electricity ravished his body.

Nearby, Mr. Wyatt was shouting to his young assistant, "No, don't touch the switch, you idiot boy! It's live! Mathcett—"

But Seward did not wait to hear whether there was a response from Mr. Wyatt's supervisor, who was tending the generator next door. Layle Smith was the fastest man in the Eternal Dungeon; the only way to be quicker than him was to anticipate where he would go next, and to be there first.

And so it was that, when the High Seeker succeeded in freeing himself from the cord and raced toward the rack, he found his way blocked by his senior night guard.

Seward did not feel any need to say anything. He knew that the High Seeker knew why he was there. Seward's hand was in his pocket, but before he could decide whether to draw the gun, Mr. Smith uttered a loud huff of exasperation and turned away—

—and kept turning, spinning on his heel so fast that neither Seward nor any other witness saw the moment when Layle Smith's booted foot swung round and kicked Seward Sobel in the groin.

Inborn quick reflexes and three decades of guardwork saved Seward from losing the ability to father more children; he jerked back so fast that Layle Smith's boot merely grazed him. But being grazed by the High Seeker's kick was like being grazed by a bullet. He went down with sparks of pain eating his loins. Only thirty years of training kept him from screaming louder than Elsdon Taylor had. The greatest pain, though, was not in his body. It was in his single thought:

He had failed. He had failed to save the Queen's heir from death, and now he had failed to save the High Seeker.

He was lying on his back, clutching his groin, with his eyes open in slits. He expected to see Mr. Smith leap over him in a final, fatal swiftness that would join his deadly fate with Elsdon Taylor's. Instead, Seward felt a hand on his belt, tugging. In the next moment, Mr. Smith had freed the whip. Its lash spun forward, with seemingly no effort, toward the power cord, which was still latched to the rack like a demon clutching at its favorite toy.

The whip snaked round the cord and jerked it back, far enough that the connection between the flowing electricity and the rack was cut. Mr. Taylor gave one final convulsion and was still.

The room, which a moment before had been filled with shouts, was now silent as a tomb as everyone turned to look at the High Seeker. The clock showed that less than one-third a minute had passed since the emergency began. Seward, who had recovered enough that he could now turn his head, expected to see the High Seeker rush toward the rack.

He did not. That was what Seward remembered until the end of his life: the High Seeker did not immediately rush forward to check on his love-mate. Instead, Layle Smith knelt next to his senior night guard and put his hand on Seward's shoulder. "Are you all right, Mr. Sobel?" he asked.

Seward managed to nod. The High Seeker squeezed his shoulder in a manner that Seward recognized as thanks; then Mr. Smith rose swiftly, still clutching Seward's whip. He made his way over to the rack, where the laborers were beginning to cluster.

When they saw him coming, they made way for him with alacrity. The minute hand of the clock reached its apex, and the electric wire ceased dancing and sparking. The laborers' supervisor, emerging from the Codifier's office with sweat on his face from his recent exertions at stopping the generator hastily, took one look at the situation and softly whistled the men into order. They departed the room silently, passing Mr. Urman, who was standing white-faced in the open doorway, staring at the rack, from which no sound came.

Chains clanked as the High Seeker freed Mr. Taylor from his bondage. Seward managed to pull himself to his feet. A crowd of dungeon-dwellers was beginning to gather at the doorway, but they were being held back by the High Seeker's day guards, whom Mr. Urman must have recruited to help him in the emergency. Seward managed to catch Mr. Urman's eye. He mouthed a single word to the junior guard: "Healer." Mr. Urman nodded, and he raced away.

Seward turned his attention to the remaining men in the room. He could see Elsdon Taylor now: the junior Seeker was motionless on the rack, his eyes closed. The High Seeker, standing next to him, had his left hand circled round Mr. Taylor's wrist, though it wasn't clear whether this was meant as a means to take Mr. Taylor's pulse, or to provide comfort, or to mourn the dead, or for some other, darker purpose.

The meaning of his right hand was all too clear, however.

Mr. Wyatt was fluttering about the High Seeker, like a scarf that flutters in the wind, continually blinding one. "You understand," he said, "you understand that this is just our display model. The rack we will sell you has more advanced features. Its legs are rounded, to avoid injury, and it has a mechanism to shut off the machinery, should there be—"

"Sir." Reaching the scene quickly, Seward took firm hold of Mr. Wyatt's arm.

"What? What? Unhand me, man!" Mr. Wyatt glared at Seward.

Seward did not release him. "Sir, are you familiar with the ballads of the Mad High Seeker?"

"What?" Mr. Wyatt spluttered. "Of course I am. Everyone has heard those old tales. I fail to see why . . ."

His voice trailed off. He had followed Seward's gaze, which was quite pointedly focussed on the High Seeker's hand, white-knuckled as Layle Smith continued to clench Seward's whip.

Seward steered Mr. Wyatt toward the door. "If you will come this way, sir," he said firmly, "I will be glad to sing you a few of the ballads you may have missed."

Mr. Wyatt did not wait to hear more. Mumbling something about business – very important business that awaited him at his store – he fled through the doorway.

Seward paused to look back. Elsdon Taylor remained motionless. So was the High Seeker, his head bowed to stare down at the rack. Seward quietly closed the door, to allow Layle Smith to be alone with his love-mate.

As he did so, he turned, and at that moment, two things happened. One was that Mr. Urman shoved his way through the crowd, with the healer running at his heels. The other was that, from the corridor leading to the prisoners' cells, Mr. Boyd emerged.

On his face was an expression that made Seward's heart sink.

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Codifier: The person charged with enforcing the ethical standards of the *Code of Seeking*. In the absence of the Codifier, the High Seeker is in charge of determining whether activities in the Eternal Dungeon violate the foundational standards of the *Code of Seeking*.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

***On Guard* 9**
DECISION

Barrett Boyd
The year 360, the tenth month.

One question I am often asked in the classroom is how the Eternal Dungeon came to be structured along military lines. The answer is simple: Yclau's royal dungeon originated as a military enquiry unit. It was set up, many centuries before it adopted the name of the Eternal Dungeon, as a means to question enemy soldiers who had been captured. As we might expect from those primitive times, the methods of enquiry were brutal.

Gradually, as the Thousand Years' War between Yclau and Vovim became punctuated by longer and longer intervals of peace, the Queen's torturers began devoting more of their attention to enemies of the state, and then, at the beginning of the modern era, to prisoners who were believed to have committed especially heinous crimes. At no point, though, did the royal dungeon cease to be regarded as a military unit; to the final years of the Thousand Years' War, it continued to question military prisoners who could not be broken by other army investigators. It may be recalled that Layle Smith's first prisoner after he returned to his duties as High Seeker in the year 359 was one such man, Thatcher Owen.

The *Code of Seeking* bears testimony to the dungeon's military origins, for example in the passage that permitted condemned prison workers to opt for a military punishment. But even without such clauses, it is clear that many of the workers in the Eternal Dungeon were familiar with military discipline, for many of those workers came from military backgrounds. Layle Smith's father was a soldier, and the High Seeker would no doubt have heard tales from his father about the importance of discipline in the army. Layle Smith's senior night guard, Seward Sobel, had formerly served as a member of the Queen's guard, an army unit. Elsdon Taylor's senior night guard, Barrett Boyd, had been a soldier for three years before he became a prison guard. It cannot be said, therefore, that these men were unaware of the consequences for disobedience . . .

—*Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

His mind was focussed, his goal clear. He no longer felt the fear that had torn at his soul the night before, weakening his body. Now he was driven, like a dagger finding its mark.

But he found, as he approached the cell, that his path was blocked by Clifford Crofford.

The young man said, "I was wondering . . ."

"Yes?" Barrett looked past him. The day guards had left, Mr. Phelps having arrived on duty. Mr. Phelps looked sleepy; for the past fortnight, all of the dungeon dwellers had spent long hours discussing what the High Seeker had done to Mr. Ferris.

"Would you like to come visit my parents tomorrow?" Mr. Crofford blurted out.

He turned his attention back to Clifford. The junior guard was staring at him with uncertainty, his cheeks pink. But his gaze did not waver from Barrett's.

Barrett said, "I have extra duty tomorrow. I'm sorry."

Clifford lowered his eyes and nodded, running the tip of his tongue nervously over his upper lip. Barrett glanced over his shoulder again. Mr. Phelps was looking curiously their way.

Barrett took hold of Clifford's arm and pulled him into the nearest cell. The renovations of the breaking cells were completed now, but this one still lay empty, awaiting its next prisoner. Barrett closed the door and put his hands on Clifford's shoulders. "You know I love you."

Clifford's eyes flashed up. A smile appeared on his face. He nodded.

Barrett tightened his grip on Clifford's shoulders. "I want you to keep that thought present in your mind. Remember that I love you and will always love you."

Clifford's smile disappeared. He searched Barrett's face with his eyes. Barrett braced himself to stave off the questions he could not answer.

But Clifford asked no questions. He simply pulled Barrett into a tight embrace.

They stood for a while like that, heart near heart, loin near loin, resting their heads on each other's shoulders. Then Barrett turned his head and found Clifford's lips. The junior guard's mouth tasted sweeter than anything Barrett had ever known in his life.

He pulled himself away before he should lose courage. "I must go," he said. "I'm on duty."

Clifford said nothing. His expression was bleak, but he did not try to pull Barrett back as Barrett opened the cell door.

This time Barrett did look back. He gave Clifford a small smile. Clifford gave him a small smile in return. Then Barrett walked on to where Mr. Phelps was awaiting him in front of their prisoner's cell.

Somewhere down at the end of the corridor, a prisoner was screaming. Barrett checked his step as he reached the door to his prisoner's cell. The scream sounded as though it were coming, not from the breaking cells, but from the entry hall or one of the rooms surrounding it.

The scream halted abruptly. Most likely it came from another Seeker or guard who was enduring the High Seeker's discipline under Mr. Sobel's lash, Barrett decided. Still, it gave him the excuse he needed.

"Go find out what that sound is," Barrett told Mr. Phelps, who had been standing next to their prisoner's cell, looking uneasily in the direction of the scream.

Mr. Phelps needed no further encouragement; he raced off, in the direction of the entry hall. Barrett noticed that Mr. Crofford and several other guards had abandoned their posts as well, though at least one guard remained on duty in front of each occupied cell.

Barrett took a deep breath and unlocked the cell door. He was not surprised to find, when he entered, that the prisoner was curled up in a ball in the corner. Mr. Holloway lifted his face. Moisture ran from his eyes and from his nose, which was red.

"Have you come to . . . ?" the prisoner whispered.

Barrett shook his head as he closed the door behind him. He did not bother to lock the cell. "Your racking has been delayed until tomorrow. Mr. Taylor has work he needs to do for the High Seeker today."

He walked forward. The hard, regular sound of his boots upon the paving stones was echoed by his heart. When he reached the prisoner, he squatted down beside him and offered him his handkerchief.

"Have you thought about what I said two weeks ago?" he asked softly as Mr. Holloway wiped his eyes and nose.

"I can't," sniffed the prisoner. "I don't remember. If I remembered— But I don't remember anything about that night."

Would the mere absence of memory be considered a confession of guilt? wondered Barrett. But he knew the answer: The *Code of Seeking* required an explicit statement that the crime had been committed or not committed. Under normal circumstances, the High Seeker might be willing to bend the rule for this case, where the prisoner obviously had no choice but to say that he did not know whether he had committed the crime. But these were not normal circumstances.

"I think I did it," whispered the prisoner. "It must have been me, mustn't it?"

"Yes," said Barrett. Like Elsdon Taylor, he had no doubt that this prisoner was the murderer.

"If I said I thought it was me . . ."

If he said he thought it was him but was not sure, it would not be a complete confession of guilt. The rack would be used to obtain that complete confession, a confession that the prisoner could not deliver.

Barrett did not know he had moved until he saw Mr. Holloway's breath quicken. The prisoner stared down at the dagger in Barrett's hand.

"Please," Mr. Holloway pleaded, "put it away. I can't . . . I mustn't . . ."

Barrett pressed the hilt into the prisoner's hand. Mr. Holloway stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Do you need my help?" Barrett asked softly.

Understanding entered Mr. Holloway's eyes. He stared at the dagger again, curling his hand hard around the hilt. A faint smile touched his lips.

"No," he said. "I don't suppose I do, do I?"

His breath was coming faster now. Quickly, Barrett reached forward and traced the circle of rebirth on his forehead. Mr. Holloway looked up from the dagger, startled.

"You have made reparation," Barrett explained as he rose. "You are transformed."

"Oh," said the prisoner, and he stared at the dagger with wonder in his eyes. Then his eyes grew unfocussed.

Mr. Holloway was right; he did not need help. He slid the dagger into his own heart with as much ease as though he had done it a dozen times – as he no doubt had. Barrett waited until the prisoner's body was still, and then he knelt down and took the dagger back. The prisoner's heart must have still been pumping faintly, for some blood spattered onto Barrett as he pulled the dagger out. Barrett reflected, with grim amusement, that it was just as well that he himself had not decided to take up the career of a secretive murderer, for he could never have carried off the deception.

He rose and remained staring down at the body, mentally lighting a flame of rebirth for the prisoner's journey into his new life. As time passed, many other flames appeared in his mind, marking the deaths of prisoners he had racked.

Then he heard excited voices in the corridor: the guards who had gone to investigate the sound of the screaming had returned. Barrett sheathed the blade, not bothering to clean it of its blood. For a moment more, he stood in place, wiping the moisture from his face onto his sleeve. Then, in preparation for his own reparation, he made the sign of rebirth upon his forehead.

He turned and went to tell the High Seeker what he had done.

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. . . It cannot be said, therefore, that these men were unaware of the consequences for disobedience; but Elsdon Taylor is a different matter.

Elsdon Taylor's activities in 360 remain an enigma to scholars: to this day, historians disagree virulently as to what extent his ignorance of the military structure of the Eternal Dungeon led to the tragic fate of Barrett Boyd. It can be said with fairness that Elsdon Taylor exacerbated an already delicate situation by continually confronting Layle Smith in public with his opposition to the High Seeker's new policies. Under such circumstances, he made it impossible for Layle Smith to ameliorate the policies he had previously announced; the High Seeker was left with the choice of either admitting he was entirely wrong or enforcing his policies to the fullest extent. This would have been particularly the case in any situation involving Elsdon Taylor's prisoner.

Yet when all is said and done, it was Barrett Boyd alone who decided, on that autumn day in 360, to give Elsdon Taylor's prisoner the means to kill himself – a capital crime by Yclau law (which, in the fourth century, still outlawed both suicide and assistance to suicide) and also by the *Code of Seeking* (which forbade prison workers from assisting prisoners in illegal activities).

However much one may fault the High Seeker for bringing matters to this pass, one can only view with sympathy the situation he found himself on that day not long after Antonius Ferris's hanging: leaving the room where Elsdon Taylor barely clung to life, only to find himself confronted by Elsdon Taylor's senior night guard, who proceeded to confess to a death-sentence crime.

It was at this point – and perhaps the only point in Layle Smith's career – that his military origins showed itself. His next act, like that of Elsdon Taylor's fierce opposition, remains an enigma to scholars who wish to provide easy answers as to whether Layle Smith was as brutal as the torture he sought to defend.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

***On Guard* 10**
CONSEQUENCES

Seward Sobel
The year 360, the eleventh month.

The Old School, leader: *See* Smith, Layle.
The New School, leader: *See* Taylor, Elsdon.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon*

EPILOGUE

The entry hall was quiet and dark, except for the steady light of the electric lamps on the crowded tables where the guards worked, sorting documents or writing up reports. Several of the guards smiled or saluted their greetings as Seward Sobel reached the bottom step of the stairs leading down from the palace above. The three sets of guards on the stairs, who had not challenged his entrance, chatted lightly with each other.

Seward glanced in the direction of the Codifier's office, but saw no sign that it had been re-opened since Elsdon Taylor's mishap on the electric rack, ten days before. The Codifier was still on leave; so was Mr. Bergsen. Only one man was left to issue orders to the dungeon inhabitants, and he was nowhere to be seen in the entry hall. No guard stood in front of his office.

Seward made his way through the pool of darkness in the middle of the entry hall. Directly ahead of him, the last of the renovation laborers were making an attempt to remove the filing cabinet next to the Record-keeper's desk. They were being foiled by the Record-keeper.

"No, no, no!" Mr. Aaron stood frowning in front of the cabinet, his arms folded. "Don't you dare touch this!"

The laborer in charge raised his cap to scratch his head. "Sir, we have orders from the Queen to haul away anything that the dungeon inhabitants don't want. You told us when we first installed this—"

"I've just spent four months having the guards here take our documents out of boxes, remove the ribbons, add paper-clips, and alphabetize the documents by drawer – am I to have them undo all that work? I will have you *racked* if you touch this cabinet!"

Seward did not wait to see how the laborers react to this threat. He had reached the entrance to the corridor to the Seekers' cells; he nodded to one of the guards there, who greeted him with a smile and courteously held the door open. Seward made his way through the doorway and up the steps.

The corridor was silent and smoke-free. The furnace-doors on the left-hand wall were gone, replaced by smooth plaster. Unwavering light came

from the electric lamps bracketed to the walls, each Seeker's cell lit by its own lamp.

Only one lamp was flickering and sputtering. It cast uneven sparks of light onto the guard standing there, looking uneasily over his shoulder at the shut door he guarded. His hand was resting on the coiled whip at his belt, as though he expected to have to use it. Seward, coming closer, heard muffled voices from behind the door. He could not immediately identify the voices, but the tone was clearly of anger.

Mr. Urman caught sight of Seward when he reached within whipping range of the junior guard. With a look of relief, Mr. Urman dropped his hand from his whip, but his voice was defensive as he said, "The High Seeker ordered me to stay outside."

"Oh?" Seward reached the doorway. He could identify the voices now; one of them appeared to be shouting. "It sounds as though Mr. Taylor is feeling better," he said, gesturing toward the door.

Mr. Urman's mouth twisted. "Still halfway to death, according to the healer; I heard the High Seeker say so. Not that that would stop the High Seeker from mutilating Elsdon Taylor."

From what Seward could hear, it sounded as though the mutilation was mutual. Well, at least Elsdon appeared unlikely to die. That was something.

"Speaking of halfway to death . . ." Mr. Urman's hand twitched in a nervous fashion on his belt. "Do you know whether the High Seeker has made any decision about Barrett Boyd's case? Clifford Crofford has been badgering me for information."

From the look in Mr. Urman's eyes, Seward guessed that the junior guard's concern was not merely on behalf of Mr. Crofford. Seward spent a moment readjusting the sheathed dagger at his belt, to give himself time to think. The moment he gave Mr. Urman the news, he knew, Mr. Urman would want to spread it all over the dungeon. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though. The High Seeker had already granted Mr. Sobel permission to make the announcement; Mr. Smith knew that the dungeon would not tolerate another hide-in-the-corner disciplinary case. Better, perhaps, that

the announcement should come from Mr. Urman. The junior guard might be able to think of a way to make the news more palatable.

"He's not going to send Mr. Boyd to the hangman," Seward replied.

Mr. Urman's breath emerged in as big a puff as if the dungeon's Lungs had released it. "So the High Seeker is finally showing sense. He has decided not to enforce the Code strictly from this point forward?"

Seward hesitated. "No, the policy of strict enforcement is still in force."

"How could that be?" asked Mr. Urman crossly. "Mr. Boyd helped a prisoner to commit suicide. The Code declares the penalty for that to be death. Or wait – the High Seeker isn't simply dismissing Mr. Boyd from employment, is he? If he does, one of the city prisons could arrest Mr. Boyd under civil charges—"

"No, no." Seward passed his hand over his face. This conversation was not going well. The support he had hoped for was looking increasingly unlikely. "He's sticking to the Code. There's a passage in the *Code of Seeking* – I'd forgotten it until the High Seeker mentioned it – that allows any dungeon resident who has held a position in a previous army division to be sentenced under that division's system of justice. The Code says 'previous army division' because—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Mr. Urman said impatiently. "We're the Queen's soldiers, by law. And Mr. Boyd was previously in the Queen's infantry. What is the infantry's penalty for assistance in suicide?"

The junior guard's hands were already in fists. Seward, abandoning the last of his hope, said quietly, "One hundred heavy lashes."

Even in the flickering light, the change of color in Mr. Urman's face was clear. He turned nearly purple with rage. "That's murder!" he cried. "Mr. Sobel, you know it's murder! The Code only allows us to beat prisoners for sixty heavy lashes at the most – anything higher isn't permitted, because it would endanger the life of the prisoner! The healer—"

"Doesn't have the ability to overrule sentences in disciplinary cases." Seward thought again of the empty office adjoining the entry hall. The Codifier could have overruled the High Seeker's decision, but Mr. Daniels

remained on leave. And the Queen, from what Seward had seen, was oblivious to the horrible difference between sixty heavy lashes and one hundred heavy lashes.

Seward said, trying to keep his voice neutral, "The infantry has been issuing this sentence for centuries."

He did not add that the infantry was considering abolishing the sentence, because it had led to so many deaths. And that was only when the sentence was carried out by an infantry soldier. . . .

"Who is to do the beating? You?" It seemed that Mr. Urman's mind moved in the same patterns as Seward's.

There was no way to avoid a straight answer. "The High Seeker will carry out the sentence. He has more experience in such matters."

"Bloody blades!" Mr. Urman's shout was so loud that it overwhelmed the sound of the shouting within the High Seeker's cell. "Of *course* he has more experience in this! He executed men in Vovim! Mr. Sobel, can't you see that this is just a way for him to exercise his sadism on someone other than—"

He stopped. Not because of the shushing gestures that Seward had been making, but because one of the voices within the cell had grown so loud that the words could now be distinctly heard.

"Don't try to pretend that you didn't intend this. You may not have known how far it would go, but you guessed that you would end up harmed in some way. You let yourself be racked only in order to try to make me feel pity for the prisoners who are racked. Well, your manipulation of my feelings won't work, Mr. Taylor. I am the High Seeker; I will not allow anyone to place himself between me and the proper exercise of the Code."

The entire corridor vibrated as a door within the cell slammed. Almost immediately, the door to the corridor opened. Mr. Urman jumped aside as though a bird of prey had suddenly swooped down upon him.

Layle Smith seemed not to see him. He had just covered his face with his hood; his hand was still jerking down the cloth. Mr. Sobel – who had spent too many years witnessing Layle Smith's unexpected moves to be

unnerved by his sudden entrance – stood his ground, just opposite the doorway.

"Mr. Sobel." The High Seeker's voice was as deadly and controlled as a blade. "You were quite right to marry a woman of your own rank. The worst possible thing a man can do is to mate himself with someone who is his subordinate."

Mr. Urman, perhaps fearing what revelation the High Seeker's next words would bring, coughed into his fist. The High Seeker's gaze flicked his way. "Ah, Mr. Urman. I fear that I will not be retiring to my cell this morning as early as I had planned. I need to work for a few more hours. If you wish to take a short break before—"

"Sir," Seward interrupted softly, glancing in both directions to determine that the corridor was still empty. "The Queen has released us from bodyguard duty."

"Oh?" The High Seeker said; there was a note in his tone that Seward could not read.

"Yes, sir," Seward replied. "The latest news from Vovim is that matters have so much worsened between the King and his lords that the King has withdrawn all his agents from Yclau in order that they might protect him from assassins at home. The Queen and her advisers believe that you are in no further danger from a Vovimian assassin."

"Ah." The High Seeker was still for a long moment before adding, "Well, then, gentlemen, I will see you this evening, after the dusk shift. I understand from the Record-keeper that my day guards have delivered a new prisoner to the breaking cells. I trust that you will rest yourself well before the new searching begins." Without a word, he turned and began walking down the corridor, in the direction of the inner dungeon.

Mr. Urman waited until the High Seeker was out of sight before sighing. "Back to normal – or what passes as normal in this dungeon. Come on. Let's go see whether he has left any bit of Elsdon Taylor alive."

Seward, his eye still on the path that the High Seeker had taken, shook his head.

"Why not?" Mr. Urman demanded. "Taylor is your friend, isn't he?"

"Yes." Seward turned his head to look at Mr. Urman. "Mr. Taylor has many friends. I'll check how he is later."

"I see," Mr. Urman said slowly. The expression on his face suggested that he had just sighted something in his path that he intensely disliked, and that he planned to grind it to death with his heel. "Well, then," he said, "I'll tell Taylor whose company you value most."

Seward said nothing. From what he knew of Elsdon Taylor, he thought it unlikely that the junior Seeker would take offense at his action. Mr. Urman, on the other hand . . .

It was like seeing the shattering of a brief truce. Perhaps, in the future, terms of peace might be offered again. But for now . . .

Mr. Urman had already turned away in order to duck past the door that the High Seeker had left open. Seward swivelled on his heel and began walking in the direction that the High Seeker had gone.

The entry hall was still crowded with guards, except at one table, whose inhabitants had abandoned it. Only one man stood there. He was staring down at the machine attached to the end of the table by a small vise. In his hand was a pencil.

He looked up as Seward approached. There was disapproval in his voice as he said, "You are off-duty, Mr. Sobel."

"Yes, sir." Seward glanced down at the small pile of mangled pencils next to the pointer. Apparently the High Seeker had been undergoing yet another failure in getting machinery to work in his presence.

"Then why are you here?" Layle Smith's voice was as sharp as an executioner's lash.

"My place is by your side, sir." Mr. Sobel took the pencil from him, stepped forward, and proceeded to sharpen it with the pointer. He was conscious of the whispers of the guards around him, accompanied by disapproving looks; he did his best to ignore them, though he felt as though he were being pelted by mud.

By the time he turned back, the High Seeker's eyes had turned thoughtful. The tone of his voice was also contemplative as he said softly, "You are likely, Mr. Sobel, to become highly unpopular in certain quarters."

"Not in the quarters that count most to me, sir." He handed the pencil to the High Seeker.

"Well, then," said the High Seeker, his eyes beginning to smile, "I would appreciate your help in my office. I need to submit a request for the purchase of a whip. You can help me fill out the form."

He felt his stomach churn, a familiar sensation by now. "Certainly, sir," he replied without hesitation; and then, as the High Seeker turned away, he took his place by Layle Smith's side, as close as a shadow.

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Battle between the Old School and the New School: *See* Codification Crisis, 360-364.

—Glossary to *Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.*

On Guard
HISTORICAL NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With the sole exception of a certain instrument of torture, all the technology in this story existed in late Victorian times. The dramatic tale of how new forms of lighting and heating transformed home and business during this period has often overshadowed the equally dramatic tale of how office work was changed by new technology. But to the average office worker at that time, easier systems of document creation and filing were no doubt as revolutionary as electric lights.

I owe Part Eight to Parhelion and Elizabeth McCollum, who not only offered me advice on Victorian technology and clothes, but also helped me work out the logistics of the scene in their hotel room. (Their bed served as the rack.)

My thanks to the Early Office Museum (officemuseum.com) for information and images that would otherwise have been difficult to track down, and also to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, for displaying a perfectly lovely Victorian filing cabinet that simply cried out to have a story written round it.

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=== *Side stories* ===

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

CHAPTER ONE

"If you ever meet our King . . ." Master Aeden had once said.

"Yes?" he had prompted impatiently. Patience came hard to him in those early days.

Master Aeden, who had been whetting his blade, gave him a level look. "Crawl on your belly," the master torturer had said flatly. "If you're lucky, you'll survive the encounter."

Layle Smith had laughed in response. He had laughed routinely in those days to any threat of danger. Now, standing in the vestibule of the King's enemy, the Queen of Yclau, he felt his stomach clench over and over, as though Master Aeden had forced boiling water down his throat. Again.

He was weaponless. Or rather, not quite weaponless, for he knew what he was capable of doing with his body, but he bore no blade, nor any whip, nor any lead pipe with which to stun his victim, nor any rope with which to strangle the victim . . . The number of potential weapons he had deliberately laid aside was frighteningly high. He fingered the book hidden in his cloak pocket, wondering how the torturers who had written it managed to break prisoners while demonstrating such unusual restraint.

Nearby, the Queen's guards eyed him uneasily. He was used to that. He had never met a man – nor a woman, for that matter – who did not fear him within a short time of meeting him. He had the aura of the High Master of hell, Master Aeden had once said, only half mocking. Layle had felt complimented at the time. Now he wished that he had a more innocent look, for the cold fearsomeness and sly intimacy he had used to bring himself to this point had encountered an unexpected barrier.

"I will not be moved," said the man sitting at the table in front of him.

The man was middle-aged, but he looked much like the elderly High Master of what had recently come to be called the Hidden Dungeon: he had the expression of a man who has seen everything and trusts no one. His eyes barely touched Layle's as he said, "You have managed to bribe and bluster and seduce and threaten and terrify your way past a dozen sets

of guards in your quest to see our Queen. Those methods will not work with me."

He winced inwardly at the man's slight emphasis on the word "our." He had a good ear for accents and had never forgotten how his Yclau mother spoke – how he himself had spoken in his early childhood, before his mother died and he was left to make his own path in the Kingdom of Vovim. He had made good use of that accent ever since his arrival in the Queendom of Yclau, passing himself off as the son of an Yclau gentlewoman. Since his mother had in fact been an Yclau gentlewoman until she was abducted to Vovim by Layle's father, this was not a hard act to play.

The Queen's secretary, still not deigning to look Layle straight in the eye, picked up a pen and said reflectively, "You are rather young to be assigned the role of an assassin. I assume that you instead have some private grievance against the Queen, which you wish to air to her ear?"

Layle's dark humor took hold of him then; he just managed to keep from laughing at the idea that he was too young to murder. "I wish only to petition her, sir. I know that she is very busy with more important business, and I would not ask for a minute or two of her time if the matter were not so urgent—"

"Take him away." The secretary gestured with one hand while beginning to write with the other. "And if he re-enters the palace grounds again, I'll have Colonel Cartwright court-martial every guard in this palace."

The two guards came toward him, but slowly, reluctantly, with their hands gripping the hilts of their ceremonial swords. Layle waited until they were too close to be able to easily release their swords; then he stomped on the foot of one of them and punched the other one in the stomach. Amidst the howls of pain, he slipped free, as easily as a fish, and ran toward the Queen's door.

He had just reached the door when he heard a click behind him. He froze, recognizing the sound. Then he turned his head slowly in the direction of the click.

The secretary was standing now, both arms outstretched as he gripped a pistol that was levelled at Layle's head. "The Queen's guards may be fools," he said, "but I am not. Lie down on your belly."

Within three minutes, Layle had been stripped of all his clothes. He remained on his stomach, his fingers interlaced behind his head as he had been instructed, while the secretary and the Queen's guards discussed what they had found in his clothing. He was spending the time trying to figure out how best to extract himself from this situation. If this had happened only a month ago, the solution would have been easy: both the guards and the secretary would be dead by now. But he dared not kill, nor even maim the men.

No matter how much pleasure that would give him.

He was still contemplating this thought, and was wishing that he had developed ways over the years to disable men in a relatively harmless manner, when he heard a voice, frigid with disapproval, say, "What is going on here?"

He lifted his head cautiously. He could not see the new arrival, for the secretary, perhaps seeking to shield the arrival's modesty, had stepped forward to block the view. His back was now to Layle. The guards, frowning with concern, hurried over to their prisoner. One put his boot hard upon Layle's back, the other his blade against the back of Layle's neck.

A moment later, the first guard was lying on the floor writhing, while the second was staring with disbelief at his hand, which was dripping blood from his own sword. Layle, who was already regretting his precipitate action, ignored the secretary's pistol, which was ground against his temple. Kneeling down, he laid the guard's sword at the arrival's feet.

"Madam," he said, bowing his head to the Queen of Yclau, "might I beg your graciousness to spare a minute or two of your time?"

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The Queen's chamber was filled to the brim with guards. Layle gathered, from the looks aimed at him, that this was unusual, as was the presence of

the guards' colonel, who was glaring at the young man who had managed to trick his way past the palace defenses. Layle was less worried about the colonel and the guards than he was about the Queen's secretary, who was sitting quietly to the side, his pistol resting on his thigh, and his hand resting on the pistol. From the contemplative look on the secretary's face, Layle concluded that the secretary was not prepared to hold his fire the next time Layle made an unwise move.

Layle took care not to stir his now-clothed body in any way, but inwardly he shifted his feet. He had been within the houses of the mid-class: the tradesmen he had robbed and tortured and killed, as well as the house of his father and his father's wife, and once Master Aeden had received permission to take Layle to see an old friend of his, though the conversation on that day had gone so awkwardly that the master torturer had soon departed with his apprentice. Layle only wondered that Master Aeden had attempted the reunion. Surely he must have known that everyone in the world despised torturers, even the guards who helped the torturers with their bloody tasks.

So the looks of hatred he was receiving from every man in the room touched him hardly more than a sprinkling of summer rain. It was the furniture that alarmed him. Marble tables, diamond-edged mirrors, velvet-cushioned chairs, rugs that looked as though they must have been imported from overseas, and towering above it all, the gilded throne upon which the Queen sat.

Gods above and below. The part of Layle that wasn't counting up how much money he could get if he sold the room's contents to a fence was telling him, "You have taken a step too high for your station in life."

It did him no good to remind himself that, if the tales his mother had told were true – and of course they must have been – then his grandfather had once visited this palace as a child. If his mother's father were standing here now – rather than being long dead, murdered by Layle's father – he would spit upon his bastard grandson.

"And how do you come to know this information about my enemy?" the Queen asked in a clear voice. She was a stout, handsome woman, and to complete the portrait of elegance, she was wearing her crown, as well as

her gold-threaded gown that had rustled like fine chain-mail when she ascended the throne. Layle knew that she must be no more than middle-aged – her surviving daughter had barely reached apprentice age – but she looked formidably old.

He hesitated. He had decided, upon one look at the Queen, to deal with her in a reasonably honest manner. It was no more than a confirmation of what he had decided on the journey here, but it still made him uneasy, to share so much damning information about himself with a stranger. It made him even more uneasy to share his information with a crowd of strangers.

This must have showed on his face, for the Queen waved her hand. "Clear the room."

"Madam!" The colonel leapt forward. "You must not strip yourself of your protection—"

The Queen turned a cold eye upon him. "Did you say 'must not,' Colonel?"

"I— Your graciousness, I only meant to suggest—"

"Did you indeed." The Queen's tone was dismissive. "I do not recall asking for your suggestion. Clear the room."

The colonel looked despairingly at the secretary, who said quietly, "As you wish, madam. But this young man has already shown himself to be dangerous."

"He has shown himself to be dangerous to anyone who tries to prevent him from speaking to me," the Queen agreed. "All the more reason to clear the room now. I do not want to have to wait to clear the room of the corpses of incompetent guards."

The colonel spluttered. The secretary, on the other hand, looked as though he might smile. "Yes, madam. May I stay?"

"I am counting on your protection. The rest of you may go." She waved her hand again.

Within two minutes, the chamber was cleared, except for the Queen, the secretary, and Layle, who had been careful to stay motionless during the exodus. He was straining his ear to check whether anyone was

eavesdropping, but there were no windows in this lamplit chamber, and the doors were far away. If he kept his voice low, it was unlikely anyone would hear him.

Not that he had any choice in the matter. He swallowed the hardness in his throat before saying, "I know what activities take place in the Hidden Dungeon, your graciousness, because I used to work there."

"Indeed." The Queen appeared not at all surprised. "Tell me what you did there, and what you did before you came there."

By the time Layle was finished, even the secretary was beginning to look uneasy. He had clicked his pistol's change lever off the safe position soon after the beginning of the recital and had come to stand within an arm's reach of Layle. Layle ignored him. He was feeling somewhat faint; the recital had taken a long time, and he had not eaten since entering Yclau, sensing, somehow, that it would not be right to commit a theft within the Queen's territory.

When he finished speaking, the Queen's only comment was, "How many people did you say you have killed?"

He thought about this before asking, "Including the ones I executed at the King's command?"

"Yes."

It took him a while to tot up the numbers in his head. When he gave the approximate answer – dividing the figures for men, women, and children – the Queen lifted her eyebrows. There was a small spell of silence as Layle thought about what he had just said.

Then the Queen said, "You are eighteen?"

"Yes, your graciousness. Since last winter."

"In Vovim, you are regarded as a child. Do you understand that you are considered to be of age in this queendom?"

He understood. In Vovim, the age of a murderer did not matter, but Yclau, being more tender toward youthful offenders, only permitted the execution of adult murderers. He wondered whether he would be given a chance to

defend himself. The Yclau liked to boast that all of their prisoners received fair trials. "Yes, your graciousness."

"And what sort of reward do you seek for the information you have given?"

He blinked, disconcerted by the change in topic. In the silence that followed, he heard the faint strains of a badly conducted orchestra, playing somewhere in the palace. Well, he was in Yclau. The Queen's rich but ugly furnishings had already told him that every tale he had ever heard about the inartistic Yclau had been true.

His silence was not due to lack of an answer. He knew the proper reply, of course. He had rehearsed it on the way here – of how he would pour every bit of information he knew into the Queen's lap, and then, if she expressed gratitude, persuade her to make manifest her thanks.

Since she did not seem to have any immediate plans to hang him – and why should she hang someone who had just provided her with weapons against her foremost war enemy? – this was the moment at which he should began his persuasion. He would start with humility, stammering that he was unworthy of any reward, and then he would shyly admit to having had a hope— But no, he would add, it would be wrong of him to ask for anything. His only desire was to serve the Queen, in whatever way his gifts would permit. . . .

"Well?" said the Queen. She was drumming her fingers on a book in her lap. Layle stared at the book, feeling bewilderment take hold of him – the same bewilderment that had led him to flee from his highly satisfying work in Vovim's Hidden Dungeon.

"I am not worthy," he heard himself say.

"What?" the Queen leaned forward, her arm moving to cover the book.

He looked up. The bewilderment was breaking him, as it had before; he felt the jagged teeth tear at his innards. He felt the bloody pain.

"Madam," he said, trying to blink away a strange pricking at his eyes, "the only reward I deserve is to be executed, and to be tortured eternally thereafter by hell's High Master. I am not worthy of Mercy's grace."

The Queen said nothing. The secretary, his eyes narrowed, said nothing. Layle lowered his gaze to the black volume in the Queen's lap. *Of course,* he thought dully. *Of course, those are the only words I could have spoken. What was I thinking before? That I could lie to the Queen and then ask to work in a dungeon where lies are abhorrent? That I could come to her by means of trickery and violence, and then receive the privilege to live in a place where prisoners are persuaded through honorable means to repent of their crimes? What madness made me think that someone like myself could work in the Eternal Dungeon? My very presence would taint its purity.*

"I'm sorry, madam." His voice sounded angry; he hoped that she understood that his anger was at himself. "I should never have come here. I . . . I would have sent a note with that information anyway, in case what I told you could be of use to you. But I should have given myself over to the soldiers in one of your lesser prisons, so that I could receive my just punishment for my crimes."

"So that you could be tortured eternally," said the Queen softly.

He did not reply. He was envisioning, not his death, but what awaited him thereafter. He had been tortured once before. That had been hard enough, to endure pain for a brief period in the hands of one of the King's torturers. But to be tortured eternally by one of Hell's men . . . He could feel himself begin to shake. He closed his eyes, pushing back furiously the impulse to chop his hand down on the neck of the secretary – who had foolishly lowered his pistol – and make his escape.

Whatever else he did, he would not return to what he had been. Not even if it meant enduring Hell's anger.

"Secretary of mine, you are standing rather too close to this young man." The Queen's voice held a faint note of warning.

"Yes, madam." The secretary quickly stepped back. "Though if I am any judge of men, it makes no difference."

"I am glad to hear that our judgment is in accord. —Young man."

He raised his eyes, as best he could. The mysterious pricking at his eyes had increased; his eyeballs felt hot, as though someone were using pokers

onto them. "Yes?" he whispered.

The Queen held up the black book. "This was the only object found on you when your body was searched. You have read it?"

He stared at the black-and-gold binding of the Eternal Dungeon's *Code of Seeking*. "Yes, madam."

"Do you recall that it says anything about eternal punishment?"

He began to reply, then hesitated, sensing a gap in his knowledge. Master Aeden had once said, approvingly, that Layle's desire to learn was his strongest characteristic.

The Queen rose to her feet, lifted the side of her gown in one hand and the black book in the other, and descended the steps of the throne, saying, "In Vovim, they believe in eternal punishment. In Yclau, we believe in eternal rebirth."

It was like a blow to the kidney, learning that hope lay ahead. "You mean . . . After I am dead, I could . . . In my next life, I might be given the chance . . ." He swallowed. "But that isn't fair. Not after what I did."

"It is not a matter of fair or not fair," the Queen said patiently as she came forward. "It is merely a matter of what is. If you repent of your misdeeds, and willingly undergo punishment for them, you are transformed and are reborn eternally. None of us deserve that gift. All of us are offered it."

He stared at the black book in her hand. The words she spoke had been there. They were the reason he had come here. But he had thought of those words as applying only to the prisoners that were searched by the torturers in the Eternal Dungeon. He had not considered that the words might apply to a young, abusive torturer who had fled from Vovim's corrupt royal dungeon.

"It isn't fair," he said softly. "Too many innocents suffered in order that I might slake my pleasure on their bodies. But if you say that such a reward is always given, whether fairly or not . . . Madam, I promise you, in my next life I will do better. I will be loyal to you, and to your successors, and to this Code that you permit your torturers to follow."

The Queen sighed. "'Permit.' Did you hear that?"

"I did, madam." The secretary's voice had grown grim. "It tells us far too much about what sort of orders the King of Vovim gives to his torturers."

"Yet it is no more than the truth. The Code is not my own creation, nor the creation of my predecessors. It sprang forth and has been nurtured by visionary men who dwell far closer to eternal rebirth than I do. —Young man."

He raised his eyes. His vision had blurred in a way that puzzled him; it was as though he were anticipating the final moments of his death. And yet even with all that he knew about the horrors undergone by prisoners who were strangled, he could feel hope growing within him – the hope that he might be granted the undeserved opportunity to do better in his next life.

The Queen reached forth her hand and touched his face, just in time to catch something wet and hot that was trickling down his face. "You are crying," she observed.

"I am?" he said blankly. He placed his fingers against his face and found to his consternation that what she said was true. Yet he never cried. The gods knew that he had attempted to on many occasions. Tears might have been a good weapon with which to weaken Master Aeden, when the master torturer was disciplining him. "I never cry," he said, bewildered again.

The Queen placed her royal hands upon his face, which was now flooding with tears. "But you will," she said firmly. "Layle Smith, you will cry again and again, before I am through with you."

CHAPTER TWO

The man at the desk, with a worldweary expression and with a whip at his hip, said, "I don't like this."

In the Hidden Dungeon, if the High Master said, "I don't like this," someone was sure to be bound to a whipping post before long. Layle braced himself.

The High Torturer of the Eternal Dungeon sighed as he pushed the Queen's note further back on his desk. "I don't like this," he repeated. "The Eternal Dungeon has always chosen its own. We've only had one case in recent years of the Queen pressing a candidate upon us: that was a highly skilled guard who had worked faithfully for the Queen, who had been showered with awards, and whose sense of honor was agreed to be of the highest degree. In this case . . ." He gestured toward the only other man in the room, namely Layle.

Taking care not to meet the High Torturer's gaze straight on, Layle said, "Sir, her graciousness said that you possess the right to reject me. If you do not wish me here, I will be glad to leave."

"Hmm." The High Torturer tapped his desk with a highly prosaic object, namely an unsharpened pencil. Layle, who could have named a dozen ways in which to torture a prisoner with an unsharpened pencil, kept his gaze lowered. "Yes, I see. You used that abject tone of voice, I suppose, when you were persuading the Queen that you were an innocent youth who had made a few mistakes and deserved a second chance?"

Layle offered no response. The truth was, the whole episode with the Queen was now becoming muddled in his mind; he could not have sworn, on oath to the gods, that his dark desire had not arranged his conduct during that interview. He had become all too aware, during his journey to Yclau, how little control he had over that part of himself.

"Lies, lies, and more bloody lies," said the High Torturer. "You convict yourself further every time you speak. What would it take, I wonder, to penetrate that barrier of your falsehoods and discover what dwells behind it?"

"The last man who tried that," said Layle, whose neck was beginning to develop a crick, "had to use a rack to succeed. I understand that your racks here aren't as good as the ones in Vovim, but perhaps if you placed me on a rack for three times as long as the Vovimian one, quantity would make up for quality."

The High Torturer was silent for a moment, while outside his office, shouts and laughter continued. Then he gave a soft chuckle. "You must have been a real handful for your previous work-master," he said. "What are you thinking? That I wouldn't know one of the oldest methods of breaking, namely goading a prisoner till he loses his temper and gives you what you want? —How old did you say you were?"

"Eighteen years and eight months, sir."

The High Torturer shook his head. "You must have been nurtured in deception in your cradle to have reached where you are at such a young age."

"No, sir." His response was swift, automatic.

The High Torturer, who had been about to toss the Queen's note into the rubbish, raised his eyebrows. "No?"

"Not from . . . Not at home, sir. I didn't learn deception there. That came later."

"Hmm." The High Torturer's eyes narrowed, and Layle thought to himself that he might as well write out his life story if he were going to begin volunteering information that the High Torturer could use against him. "You're an orphan, the Queen said?"

"Yes, sir." So she had not told him the full story. That was an unexpected gift from Mercy's grace.

"You were corrupted by bad company, I suppose?" The High Torturer's voice was bland.

He raised his eyes then. The office was dim, the oil lamp revealing the many expensive furnishings crammed into the small space. He met the High Torturer's gaze squarely. "Only my own, sir."

The High Torturer tapped his pencil a half dozen times before waving his hand. "All right, wait outside."

He waited to see whether any further instructions were forthcoming, but the High Torturer had already turned his attention to the book he had been reading when Layle arrived. Layle recognized the book as being the *Code of Seeking*. That, more than anything else, told him what sort of place he now dwelt in.

Though from the looks of it, he thought as he pushed closed the office door behind him, he wouldn't be in this place for long. Unless, of course, the High Torturer chose to lock him in a cell.

Sighing, Layle leaned back against the wall next to the High Torturer's office, closing his ears to the raucous commotion in front of him. It had come as a shock to him to discover on the previous day that the Queen had no intention of hanging him. A technicality, he was given to understand by her secretary, due to the fact that Layle's killings as an adult were not considered murder under Vovimian law, which had governed him until his arrival in Yclau.

"Which is not to say," announced the Queen, "that I am allowing your past to go unpunished. I think you will find that what you consider a reward will in fact cause far deeper pain than if I had simply hanged you."

Dimly, he was beginning to understand what she had meant. If he had been executed the previous day, repentant for his deeds of the past, his life's memory would have been severed in a short time, and he would have begun his new life with little or no memory of what he had done in the past. Here in the Eternal Dungeon, though, the constant presence of prisoners would keep sharp the memory of his previous dark deeds. And that, in turn, would keep alive the darkness within him. . . .

He forced himself to open his eyes. Many men crowded the entry hall to the Eternal Dungeon, but even through the haze of tobacco smoke, it was easy to identify which ones were the torturers. They wore black hoods over their heads – albeit with the face-cloths presently flung back – and they carried whips looped and hooked at their belts, some at the right hand and some at the left. Their high-collared jackets were made of rich silk, with gold braiding on their shoulders and with the newly fashionable frog-work

fastening shut their jackets. They wore gleaming riding boots whose only purpose must be to show off their high rank, unless horses were hidden in this underground dungeon. The guards in the entry hall were easily identified too, not only because they carried daggers at their hips, but because they were less richly dressed than the torturers: their jackets were of grey worsted.

Layle frowned. He liked to think that he was a person who could see beyond outward appearances – could tell when someone dressed in haughty clothes was actually meek and on the point of breaking – but outward appearances counted a great deal in the art of torture. It seemed to him that the uniform the Eternal Dungeon's torturers wore – rich silk, as though they were high-born courtiers – clashed with the humility that the *Code of Seeking* enjoined upon the torturers. What was it that the Code said again? "A torturer is little more than a prisoner himself . . ." What a halfhearted way of phrasing it. The Code *ought* to say flatly, "Torturers are prisoners," and it ought to say so straightaway, so that anyone reading the Code would be left in no doubt, from the beginning, as to the status of this dungeon's torturers.

Or was he simply projecting his own situation onto the other torturers here?

He scanned again the entry hall, which had rocky walls and a ceiling so high that he could not see the top amidst the shadows. Yes, the torturers' clothing bothered him, and so did the fact that the face-cloths of their hoods were raised. He had read in the Code that the torturers must cover their faces when torturing their prisoners; once he had understood the reason for that, the rule had made sense. But did the authors of the Code really think that the moment of torture was the only time when a prisoner might read the mood of a torturer from his expression? If Layle was a prisoner destined to be tortured (*and perhaps that is the case now,* part of him whispered), he would be gleaning information about the man who searched him from the moment that he first glimpsed his torturer.

And the information he would glean from the current set of torturers . . . Layle narrowed his eyes. He was barely conscious that he had taken the stance he did when searching prisoners: his feet planted far apart, his arms

crossed, his expression hard as he scrutinized his victim. He did not like what he saw.

If he were a prisoner, if he was destined to be tortured in one of the cells here, he was quite sure that none of the torturers or guards here would intimidate him. All of them looked idle and slightly bored; several were exchanging coarse jests with one another.

And that was another problem: the level of noise in the hall. Layle thought back to his own initial entrance into Vovim's royal dungeon: the dark corridors where the only sound was the scream of prisoners from behind locked doors. He did not want to turn the Eternal Dungeon into the Hidden Dungeon, but there was nothing about this brightly lit hall, filled with careless chatter and laughter, that would intimidate him if he were to be searched. On the contrary, it would lend him hope that he could escape the worst. And with hope would come a determination to fight his torturer.

He glanced over at the Record-keeper, sitting at his desk near the High Torturer's office – the only man in this room who seemed to actually have some duties. As Layle watched, a young boy, dressed in the frilly costume of a palace page, dumped a stack of papers on the Record-keeper's desk before turning and trotting back up the steps to the palace above.

"More?" said the Record-keeper, but his voice was resigned. He was a young man, not much older than Layle, but with spectacles that made him look prematurely mature. He cast a tired look at the new stack of papers and then continued work on one of the many stacks already on his desk.

Layle slid silently behind him – taking care to avoid smudging chalk on the slate-tablet on the wall behind the Record-keeper – and bowed his head so that he could see what work was being done. The Record-keeper was simply making a copy of a routine document, requesting more fuel to be delivered to the dungeon – a sad waste of his training. "Can't you get one of the apprentices to do that?" Layle asked.

The Record-keeper jerked with surprise, and then glared over his shoulder at Layle. "What are you talking about?" he asked shortly.

Layle – who had been reminding himself that he really must break his habit of creeping up on colleagues at work – opened his mouth and then

shut it. This was not the Hidden Dungeon, where a third of the torturers were apprentice boys, whose idleness and arrogance could be stemmed by putting them to work at dull tasks. But if there were no apprentices . . .

"How in the names of . . . How are you going to get through all that work?" Layle just managed to catch himself in time from uttering a Vovimian oath. He made a note to himself that he must learn all of the Yclau oaths. Or was it even proper for a torturer in the Eternal Dungeon to casually swear?

The Record-keeper sighed heavily. "Who knows? The previous man in my position was sacked because he couldn't keep up with the work. No doubt I'll be turned out within a month."

He sounded glum and without hope. Layle, gazing out again upon the torturers and guards who were jesting and gossiping, felt a slow burn of anger begin in him. He could do nothing about the torturers, of course. But the other men in this hall . . .

A group of guards nearby were shouting with excitement over the results of the latest draw of their domino bones on one of the entry hall's tables. Layle supposed that there was not a group of guards anywhere in the world who would not waste their time in bones-games if given the opportunity. Layle had always received a special pleasure out of flogging such loafing guards in the Hidden Dungeon. Now he walked over to the group. Reminding himself that he was a guest here, he said in his mildest voice (which would have sent chills down the spine of anyone who knew him well), "If you've nothing else to do, why not help the Record-keeper? He's burdened with more work than he can handle."

The guards turned toward him. They were dressed in a lackadaisical manner: their jackets were unbuttoned, their old-fashioned cravats were untied, and their boots were dirty. They looked blankly at Layle till one of them put voice to the general sentiment: "Who the bloody blades are you to tell us what we should be doing?"

One of the guards, who was resting his boots on a chair as he sipped from a mug of what smelled like rum, said in a nonchalant manner, "He's right, you know."

This produced groans from the listeners. Another guard, scooping up his winnings at the bones-game, said, "Oh, sweet blood. Don't get all dutiful and goody-good on us."

The other guard simply smiled serenely as he set down his mug. "Go," he said. "Earn your pay for a change. That goes for the rest of you too." He addressed the remaining guards.

They groaned loudly, and protested, and even cursed the guard, but they went, saving their final curses for Layle. Layle watched them go, ticking off in his mind how many lashes each of them needed in order to be taken into hand. Then he turned his attention to the guard who possessed mysterious power over the others.

Like the Record-keeper, he was young, no more than a decade older than Layle, and he was somewhat less careless of his appearance than the other guards. His voice was easygoing as he said, "You're the new man that the Queen sent us, aren't you? Welcome to the Eternal Dungeon." Without lifting his boots from the chair, he offered his arm in greeting.

Layle simply looked at him. Apparently, his looks had the same power here as they did on the guards in the Hidden Dungeon, because after a moment, the guard began to look uneasy. He dropped his arm.

Layle waited another minute – timing was everything – before asking in his politest, chilliest voice, "Is it considered proper in the Eternal Dungeon for guards to introduce themselves to their superiors while remaining seated?"

Without moving from his place, the guard lifted his eyebrows. "You're not a torturer here yet. And even if you become one, it will be a considerable number of years before you're higher in rank than I am. Anyway" – he smiled, as though trying to take away the sting of his rebuke – "we're not formal, here in the Eternal Dungeon."

Layle let his gaze drift away from the guard. "Maybe that's the problem."

A new prisoner was just arriving, escorted down the stairs by visiting guards. His arms were bound behind him, and he appeared scared. Then he looked round the bright room, with its mindless chatter, and his expression

transformed into hardness and a certain amount of smugness. He actually laughed when he reached the Record-keeper's desk.

Layle turned his attention back to the guard. The guard had his attention focussed on the prisoner too; another look of uncertainty had travelled over his face. He slowly looked back at Layle. Layle stood with his arms crossed, saying nothing.

The guard took his feet off the chair. He rose. Stiffly he said, "I am Seward Sobel . . . sir."

"Mr. Sobel." He was not actually sure how guards were addressed in this dungeon, but the Code seemed so preoccupied with the dignity of the prisoners that it seemed likewise appropriate for Layle to address the guards in a formal manner. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

The guard began to reply to this, then stopped. "Excuse me, sir," he murmured. "The High Torturer has need of me."

Layle turned and saw that the High Torturer had stepped out of his office; the man was beckoning impatiently toward Seward Sobel, who slipped over to his side with a graceful glide that caused Layle to reassess him. Though, really, he told himself, he should not underestimate the powers of a guard who had the ability to break up a bones-game with minimal fuss.

He looked round the hall again. The guards he had addressed earlier were sitting at another table now, loudly complaining as they penned documents. Layle watched them for a while, but they were doing their work amidst the complaints, so he let them be. He was more concerned about the remaining guards, some of whom were beginning to mock the workers.

"How in the names of Mercy and Hell has this dungeon managed to function till now?" Layle muttered under his breath. The lack of discipline he was witnessing would have been unthinkable in the Hidden Dungeon, where the High Master was quick to lash any guard found neglecting his duties. Layle supposed that the idleness here represented the greater freedom which the Code permitted to its guards and torturers, but surely freedom need not mean anarchy.

He approached some of the guards engaged in hooting at the "duty boys," who were turning red-faced at this onslaught of public opinion against them. Sliding softly up to them, Layle said, "Surely you have better things to do than make mock at men who are—"

The rest of his words were lost amidst the loud hoots. "Get out of my way, boy." One of the guards, who was wearing civilian clothes, grinned and gave Layle a shove.

The sudden silence in the hall was so complete that Layle could hear the flutter of some sort of winged creatures on the dark ceiling above. He looked down at the mocking guard, who was now whimpering at his feet. The other guards were staring at him, as they might stare at a dog that frothed at the mouth.

Feeling a familiar sense of excitement and an unfamiliar sense of shame, Layle said quietly, "I apologize, Mr. . . ."

His victim continued to whimper at his feet. A nearby guard, white-faced, said, "That's Abraham Longmire. He's the torturer in charge of the day shift – he's second in command to the High Torturer."

Layle gathered that he had just made the worst possible enemy, but he kept his mind from the implications of that. "I apologize, Mr. Longmire. I did not mean to lose my temper like that. But you really must take care not to use force on anyone unless you are prepared for the possibility that the other person will use force in return."

"What I've been telling him for years." There was gruff respect in the voice of a torturer who had been listening in on the conversation. The nearby guards were avoiding his eye.

Layle was used to that. He glanced round. The rest of the hall was beginning to return to what it considered normal, though the conversation was more subdued than before, and a number of the men in the entry hall were casting wary glances his way. None seemed inclined to interfere with him, though the act that Layle had just committed would have gotten him bound to the High Torturer's whipping post within seconds, had he committed it in the Hidden Dungeon.

Layle thought with longing of the strict rules of the Hidden Dungeon, the hard measures taken by Master Aeden to keep his young assistant in line. Layle had been fettered there, and a good thing too, or he would have murdered a score of men before his first week in the dungeon was completed.

Now he had nothing holding him back except his desire to serve the Queen and her Code with loyalty.

Feeling sick, he leaned down and tried to help the torturer to his feet. "Are you all right, Mr. Longmire?"

"No, I'm not bloody all right, you fucking—" Mr. Longmire shoved Layle's hand back, struggling to his feet as he continued to curse. A few of the curses, as it happened, were accurate – Layle was indeed a low-born Vovimian bastard – but he did not allow that fact to be reflected on his face; he kept his expression icy.

After a while, Mr. Longmire seemed to realize that his curses were having no effect. Dusting himself off, he grumbled, "I'll see that you're beaten for this."

So the High Torturer's whipping post did come into use occasionally? That was helpful to know. Layle said simply, "I will be glad to submit myself to any punishment that the High Torturer considers necessary."

The guards were eyeing him askance now, obviously unable to figure out this young man who alternated between sudden violence and polite submission. Finally, one of them decided upon an appropriate response. "I'm bored. We might as well do documentwork while we're waiting for new prisoners to arrive."

"Good idea," said another guard, trying manfully to ignore the fact that he and the other guards had been mocking such advice a moment before. "I'll get some pens from the Record-keeper."

o—o—o

An hour later, the High Torturer stepped out of the Codifier's office. He barely noticed his junior night guard's quiet word of farewell as they parted company; he was busy looking round at the still entry hall, where

the loudest sound was the scratching of pens. Every guard in the entry hall was sitting in front of documents; the torturers had left the hall altogether.

Finally the High Torturer made his way over to the desk of the Record-keeper and asked, "What is going on here?"

"A miracle," replied the Record-keeper. Without looking up from one of the few documents left on his desk, he pointed in the direction of Layle, who was now softly suggesting to a guard that he might want to fasten his jacket.

The High Torturer looked thoughtfully at the young Vovimian for a while before approaching him.

o—o—o

Layle was unsettled by the success he was having in bringing order to the entry hall. He had never tried anything like this before. Disorder had been his goal in the Hidden Dungeon. He had gone beyond the usual boyish pranks that the master torturers were accustomed to receive from their apprentices; the master torturers had learned to be exceedingly wary of Layle when he smiled up at them, even before he reached his journeyman years. Many a master torturer had awakened from what he had thought would be a spell of wine and lovemaking with a splitting headache and the realization that he had given up his wallet to his overnight visitor.

Master Aeden alone had been immune to Layle's seductions, if only because he knew what Layle's background had been prior to his arrival at the Hidden Dungeon. "You are a rapist and a murderer," Master Aeden had once said flatly to him when no one was around to listen, "and I will treat you as such until you learn to behave properly."

He wondered what Master Aeden would think to find him here, trying to teach the Eternal Dungeon's guards to behave properly. Then he cast aside all thoughts of the roughly affectionate master torturer. Layle had known, when he fled the Hidden Dungeon, that he would lose the one man in the world who was willing to remain faithful to him, despite what he was. And he had known that, after all he had done over the years, he deserved nothing less than this loss.

He was contemplating this – was thinking of how little he deserved to be standing free in this dungeon – when he heard his name and turned to see the High Torturer beckoning him. He quickly made his way over to the High Torturer, who had not waited to see whether his command was obeyed, but had immediately made his way over to a door in the rocky wall of the entry hall.

There were guards in front of the door. Layle had noted this the moment he arrived in the entry hall – he was accustomed to counting the exits in any room he entered – and he had therefore assumed that the door led to the dungeon's prison cells. But when the High Torturer, stepping unchallenged past the guards, opened the door, Layle glimpsed a neat, book-lined office not unlike the High Torturer's, except that there was a second set of guards watching over a door at the back of the room.

This much he saw before he was pricked by the daggers of the first set of guards.

Reminding himself that he was not to kill anyone in this dungeon, Layle stepped back and eyed the guards with curiosity. They appeared to hold no special animosity against him; the moment he was out of range of the door, they silently sheathed their daggers again. He noticed, however, that they had guns strapped to their right hips – the only guns he had seen in the dungeon so far.

The High Torturer, who had begun to step through the doorway, paused and said to the guards, "He's wanted inside."

"We've had no instructions, sir." The guard's voice was polite but firm. Layle made a mental note that there was at least one guard in this dungeon who knew his business.

The High Torturer sighed. "Edwins?"

An older man appeared in the frame of the doorway, holding a book. Even without seeing his ink-stained hands, Layle would have known he was a secretary; he had the look about him of a man who has been bothered at important business. "You should have requested a pass for him," he said to the High Torturer.

The High Torturer accepted this scolding silently, though with a frown. The secretary said to the guards, "He's wanted inside."

The chief guard, without moving his gaze from Layle, said, "You will strip yourself, sir."

Layle glanced at the High Torturer to see whether the guard was making mock, but the High Torturer simply said to the guard in a weary voice, "Will you at least let him past you so that he can have privacy as he strips?"

"No," replied the guard. "We've been warned about him."

Again, there appeared to be no animosity in him; his tone was businesslike. Fascinated, Layle stripped himself of his clothes, glancing once over his shoulder to see what the reaction was of the other men in the entry hall. A few of them were eyeing him – that was hardly surprising, given his age and his looks – but nobody seemed particularly surprised that he should be taking off his clothes. He gathered that this ritual was not unknown.

He and his clothes were searched with ruthless efficiency before he was permitted into the secretary's room. Then he was searched again by the second set of guards. By now thoroughly intrigued as to his destination, Layle gathered up his clothes and his dignity and stepped into the room beyond the second set of guards.

The first thing he saw was Seward Sobel, standing with his back to the door, his head bowed as he listened to someone speaking to him from the desk that he stood in front of. With his back now pricking with warning, Layle stepped closer until he could see the man behind the desk.

"Josh," said the High Torturer, coming forward as the guards closed the door behind them, "here he is. Layle, I believe that you have already met our Codifier . . ."

But Layle barely heard him; still naked, he was standing aghast, staring at the man behind the desk. He blurted out, "I thought you were the Queen's secretary!"

"I am," said the Codifier in an unperturbed fashion, folding his hands upon his desk.

The High Torturer inserted, "It is customary for the Queen's secretary to serve as our Codifier. Our current Codifier is in the process of resigning from his other duties, however, so that he can devote full time to supervising the Eternal Dungeon." From the tone in his voice, it did not appear that the High Torturer approved of this decision.

Layle, remembering belatedly that he ought to clothe himself, pulled his undervest over his head as he felt his heart sink. Of all the men in the world he should have antagonized, he had chosen the Eternal Dungeon's Codifier. The Codifier, who was appointed to enforce the *Code of Seeking*. The man who had greater power in this dungeon than even the High Torturer.

The man who could no doubt order his arrest the moment he believed that Layle had failed to serve the Queen with loyalty.

He had, perhaps, five minutes left before that eventuality. He decided to spend the time in a useful fashion. "Useful," in Layle's vocabulary, meant marking the exits and the weapons in this room.

There was not much here to cheer his heart. Like the entry hall, this "room" in the underground dungeon was no more than an untamed cavern; the Codifier's desk was located near a waterfall and pool. Any weapons here were artfully hidden, though Layle eyed the stalagmites hopefully for a moment before deciding they were too thick to be wrenched from the ground. One exit was behind him, too heavily guarded to be of use to him. The only other exit was what appeared to be a bank vault at the back of the room. He could take hostages—

It was at this venture that he remembered that he was here, not as a prisoner taken captive unwillingly, but as a self-confessed criminal who had agreed to any punishment that the Queen deemed necessary. Feeling his doom closing in on him, he concentrated his attention on the Queen's representative.

The Codifier appeared to enjoy lingering punishments, for he was sitting back in his chair, remaining silent as the High Torturer said, "Well, young

Layle, I can't say that it's been easy to make a decision over what to do with you. Normally, any torturer who is new to this dungeon is given a period of training, during which his performance is under scrutiny. If he is judged unworthy of the traditions of the Code, he is released from his training and is usually permitted to depart from this dungeon."

"Usually," emphasized the Codifier.

"As you say, Josh," agreed the High Torturer. "We guard our secrets of searching well; if we believe that a torturer-in-training will blab those secrets to the world, he is sentenced to isolation in a life prison. We do not have that problem very often," he added dryly. "The torturers we consider to be potential dangers are never allowed to enter this dungeon."

"But in this case . . ." The Codifier delicately left the sentence unfinished.

"In your case, we have decided that you cannot be trusted with even the power of a torturer-in-training unless we are reasonably certain that you have the ability to complete your training." As he spoke, the High Torturer seated himself in the only remaining chair. "Therefore, with the agreement of the Codifier, I am setting a test for you. I will allow you to search a prisoner. You will be judged by your performance in searching that prisoner. If you pass the test, you will be accepted as a torturer-in-training, with all the accompanying supervision and discipline which comes with that position."

"Yes, sir," said Layle, whose back was not unfamiliar with the taste of a whip.

There was a pause. The waterfall gurgled, one of the guards outside spoke to somebody, the Codifier's pocket-watch ticked. Mr. Sobel, though he had stepped aside to allow the Codifier full access to the new arrival, had not yet looked at Layle. Layle waited, wondering what the others expected him to say.

The High Torturer added, "The prisoner I am giving you is an important one. We have evidence that he has committed a rape against the Queen's own niece. The evidence is enough to convict him; however, the Queen wants a full confession so that the prisoner cannot weasel out of his deeds when he is brought before the magistrate. We have instructions from the

Queen to break the prisoner thoroughly, using whatever methods we deem necessary."

"Yes, sir," he replied in an easy manner. He had thought that the transition from Vovimian torturer to Yclau torturer would be more difficult than this, but evidently the High Torturer was giving him a simple case for his test. Break the prisoner. Use any methods necessary. Layle could carry out such instructions in his sleep.

The High Seeker added, "I understand that you have already met my senior-most guard, Seward Sobel."

Layle felt the desire then to slit the throats of all the men in front of him. Such an impulse was his natural reaction when he found himself in a bad position, even though he knew that he was the one who was to blame in this case.

The Codifier, the High Torturer, Mr. Longmire, Mr. Sobel . . . Gods above and below, he'd managed to anger or alienate all four of the highest-ranked men in this dungeon. He doubted he could have changed matters where the Codifier and the High Torturer were concerned, but surely he possessed enough intelligence that he could have checked who was in charge here before he began issuing indiscriminate reprimands.

Mr. Sobel had enough mercy not to laugh openly at him. The High Torturer continued, "Sobel has the authority to stop any activities you engage in. I want you to understand that. You will obey any order he gives you in the breaking cell, and if you do not, you will be placed under arrest and charged with whatever crime seems appropriate. You are not to act as you did in your previous workplace."

"Yes, sir." He wondered what the three men in front of him thought he was going to do – rape his prisoner?

Probably. They must know how breakings were conducted in the Hidden Dungeon, if only because Layle had taken such care to inform the Queen.

But did they understand that he had acted under orders in the Hidden Dungeon? That Master Aeden would have beaten him bloody – and had, on more than one occasion – if he'd deviated from those orders in the

slightest? From what Layle had seen so far, he possessed far more self-discipline than any other torturer in this dungeon.

He had enough sense not to say this. The three men were waiting again, apparently expecting him to say more, but he could not figure out what it was they wanted him to say. He had been given orders; he had promised to obey them. Did they want his baubles as surety for his promise?

He was perilously close to smiling. And then he knew, from the narrowing of the Codifier's eyes, that he had passed over that line.

But all that the Codifier said was, "You will need this." He pushed something over his desk: a black volume with gold lettering.

Layle slowly picked up the *Code of Seeking*. The soft leather binding felt familiar to his hand. He opened the book to its front flyleaf. Yes, there it was: the signature of the man who had owned the volume before Layle.

—his hands tighten upon the soft flesh of the neck, the prisoner's breathing stops, the body begins to flail in a useless attempt to escape death—

"Layle Smith?"

He opened his eyes. Or rather, he did not open his eyes, for his eyes were open already, but the dark film that had clouded them was gone, along with the visions, the smells, the touch, the feeling of the prisoner dying under his hands . . .

"Yes?" He wasn't sure who had spoken, so he kept his gaze directed toward the book, waiting a few seconds before looking up.

They were all staring at him. He wondered how long he had been gone. He carefully tucked the *Code of Seeking* into his jacket pocket before they should notice that his hands were shaking.

"That will be enough, I think," said the Codifier, and with these highly ambiguous words, he dismissed his audience.

o—o—o

Leaning against a doorpost, Mr. Sobel reached into his jacket pocket, took out a leather case, flipped it open, and pulled a long, red cylinder from the

satin lining. He offered it to Layle. "Cigarette, sir?"

"No," replied Layle shortly.

Mr. Sobel lit his cigarette with the aid of an oil lamp bracketed to the corridor wall before saying, "You prefer a cigar or pipe?"

"I don't smoke." Layle had not smoked since the day, at age five, that his mother found him valiantly puffing away at one of his father's cigars and had given him such a mournful look that he had immediately tossed away the offending article.

Even his father had refrained from smoking in his mother's presence. Or so his mother had told him; he had no memory of his mother's abductor.

Mr. Sobel emitted a long breath of smoke before asking, "Not even at your last workplace, sir? I heard that smoking's permitted in the Border District prisons."

"What?" Layle frowned. He was wondering, not only what in the gods' name that Mr. Sobel was talking about, but also how long the guard was going to keep up his sarcastic manner of calling Layle "sir."

"Blackstone Prison – isn't that where you came from, sir? In the Border District?"

It took Layle a moment to remember that "Blackstone Prison" was the Hidden Dungeon's official name this month. Then he realized Mr. Sobel's mistake. "I'm from the Border District, yes," he said, in as smooth a manner as he always possessed when he lied. "Or at least" – it was best to temper one's lies with occasional truths – "my mother was from that district. I didn't work at Blackstone for long."

"Well, no, sir, you wouldn't have." Mr. Sobel smiled at him. "Which school did you attend, if I may ask?"

He needed to put an end to this right here, before Mr. Sobel realized that the Blackstone Prison that Layle had worked at was not located in the Border District of Yclau. "The best my family could afford," he said. "Which is to say, you've never heard of it. Have you been a guard at the Eternal Dungeon since leaving school?"

Suddenly the guard seemed to be taking a great interest in the smoke winding upwards from his cigarette. "No, sir. I've only worked here for five years. I was a member of the Queen's Guard before then."

A highly skilled guard who had worked faithfully for the Queen, who had been showered with awards, and whose sense of honor was agreed to be of the highest degree. . . . The High Torturer's words whispered in Layle's memory. Layle looked at Mr. Sobel with renewed interest. He said slowly, "Were you allowed to smoke in the Queen's Guard?"

Mr. Sobel's gaze flicked back to Layle. "No, sir. I only picked up that habit after arriving at the Eternal Dungeon."

Layle made no reply. After a moment, Mr. Sobel added with a smile, "Of course, the High Torturer would flay my back if I smoked while in a breaking cell. But we guards have long shifts standing outside the prisoners' cells. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, yes," said Layle, "I understand." He understood that smoking on duty was a killing offense in the Hidden Dungeon. Not even he had been tempted to break that rule.

He was not sure how much of his contempt for the Eternal Dungeon's lax ways showed on his face, but Mr. Sobel straightened, stubbed out his cigarette, and said stiffly, "Would you like to see one of the breaking cells now, sir?"

"If you please." He turned his attention to the corridor they were standing in.

It was dull. Layle had expected that. He had known that he would not find here any of the depictions of Hell's domain that decorated Vovimian prisons, reminding prisoners of the fate that awaited them – and reminding torturers that they must obey Hell's representative, the King.

But no decorations whatsoever? No carvings on the lintels, no scrolled metalwork on the lamp brackets, no mosaics on the floor, no paintings on the ceiling? It was not as though the corridor even spoke of stark terror; its walls were painted a pleasant green. How in the names of all the gods did the torturers here manage to intimidate their prisoners in such a setting?

Perhaps the cells were more frightening. Layle waited impatiently as Mr. Sobel brought out a set of keys and used one of them to open a cell door. Then the guard stepped back, allowing Layle to enter first.

Layle had to set aside a momentary fear that he was being tricked into imprisonment. He stepped inside the cell, his eyes adjusting quickly to the darkness within.

There was nothing there. No brands, no bores, no thumbscrews, no leg-locks . . . nothing but a squat iron stove, well blackened, in the middle of the room.

He gazed upon it as he might have gazed upon the embodiment of Mercy. Here at last was what he had been seeking: a sign that the Eternal Dungeon was on a higher plane than the prisons he had known before.

Warmth. Warmth for the prisoners, humane comfort. Layle did not know of a single prison in Vovim that provided stoves for its prisoners. He stared down at the sign of mercy, asking, "Are these in all the cells?"

"All except the rack rooms and the torturers' living cells, sir."

Layle turned round slowly to look at Mr. Sobel in the dim light. "Our . . . living cells, did you say?"

"Yes, sir. That's what the torturers' apartments are called. I don't know whether you realize that the torturers here take an oath to remain eternally bound within this dungeon—"

"I know that." He turned his attention back to the stove. Comfort to the prisoners that was not offered to their torturers. And the torturers had named their own living quarters in a manner that reminded the torturers of their fellowship to the prisoners being searched. . . . Oh, gods, this was a prison like no other.

He had been right to come here. He had been very right.

He forced himself to look round at the rest of the room. Beside him, Mr. Sobel said, "I can bring in a lamp, sir. . . ."

He shook his head. "No need. I can see." Not that there was much to see. The room was empty except for a toiletry set in the corner and a stone

shelf with a mattress and blankets and pillows atop it – pillows! "Is this how the cells are normally furnished?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. The prisoners are left unchained, so we don't place the instruments of torture in here, lest they use them as weapons against us. However, there's a whipping ring over there." Mr. Sobel pointed toward the end of the cell.

Layle looked at the whipping ring, high up on the wall, and then looked back at the sheets. "How many prisoners have hanged themselves from the whipping ring?"

Mr. Sobel looked disconcerted. "Ah . . . too many, sir. The High Torturer has been trying to determine a solution to that problem."

Layle nodded, began to turn away, and then found himself reaching forward to open the stove.

There was wood inside. He closed the stove and said, "How many prisoners have used the wood – or worse, flaming wood – to fight their way past the guards?"

Mr. Sobel looked even more disconcerted. "None while I've been here, sir."

"One of them will, eventually. You should figure out some way to prevent the prisoners from being able to open their stoves. Locks, perhaps."

Mr. Sobel promptly pulled out a memorandum book and pencil from his jacket, jotted down a note, and said, "I'll pass on that suggestion to the High Torturer, sir. Is there anything else you would like to see?"

"The instruments of torture," he replied, pointing out the obvious. Though he supposed that, in the Eternal Dungeon, this might not be so obvious a statement.

"They're kept in the rack rooms, sir. If you'll come this way . . ."

They made their way back into the corridor as Layle reflected that, if Mr. Sobel was being sarcastic, he was maintaining a wonderful consistency about it. Could it be that his honor was high enough to permit him to overlook Layle's initial mistake?

Layle was not used to dealing with honorable guards. The primary duty of the guards in the Hidden Dungeon had been to keep the torturers imprisoned. Layle, who had clearly possessed no desire to leave his satisfying work there, had been granted special permission to take occasional trips outside the dungeon, and since Layle was still young, Master Aeden had been permitted to accompany him. But many a torturer had tried to slip past the guards, only to be viciously wounded in the process. In the Hidden Dungeon, the guards were the only men feared more than the torturers.

Layle ran his eye along the guards standing outside the cell doors. He did not like what he saw. Most of the men were smoking; a few were sipping from flasks, and he guessed that they were not drinking water. All of them were chatting with one another, barely taking notice of the doors behind them.

"How many prisoners escape from this dungeon each year?" Layle asked abruptly.

Mr. Sobel hesitated, and then recited the figure. It was less than Layle had expected. He supposed that the torturers' humane treatment of their prisoners made a difference in how many prisoners attempted to escape. But given a determined prisoner, paired with a lax guard . . .

Suddenly Mr. Sobel paused before a guard. "Argus," he said, "stop whistling."

"Why should I?" asked the guard in an unconcerned manner.

Layle winced. But Mr. Sobel merely said, "Aside from the fact that I've given you an order, you might have the brains to remember what happened to Orton after the High Torturer heard him whistling. The High Torturer *really* hates whistling, Argus."

Argus's face drained to the color of curd. "I didn't know."

"Now you do. Don't make that mistake again, will you?"

Layle waited until they were halfway down the corridor before he asked, "Is this your first command position?"

Mr. Sobel looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. "Ah . . . yes, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're being too soft. You should have ordered him flogged the moment he defied your orders."

"Beatings can only occur in this dungeon where the Code permits it, or where the High Torturer orders it, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice had turned expressionless.

Layle, pausing, scrabbled in his coat pocket a moment before bringing out his copy of the Code. He flipped through it till he found the section on the guards.

Mr. Sobel was correct; nowhere in the *Code of Seeking* were guards enjoined to punish disobedient guards who were under their control. Layle closed the book, thinking hard. It was becoming clear that the punishment of guards and torturers in this dungeon was a matter of the High Torturer's whims; whistling was severely punished, because it bothered the High Torturer, while smoking and drinking and gambling were not. Cursing was something that the High Torturer himself did. Layle asked incredulously, "Are you saying, Mr. Sobel, that you must seek permission from the High Torturer before beating a guard who spits in your face?"

Mr. Sobel hesitated before replying, "Enforcement of the Code lies in the hands of the Codifier and the High Torturer, sir. I act only under their orders in matters not covered by the Code."

Layle bit his lip before he should say something foolish. In this dungeon, questioning the wisdom of the Code must be like walking into a temple and questioning the wisdom of the sacred dramas.

He was silent for several minutes. Finally, as they reached a portion of the corridor that was dim, Layle said, "In my last workplace, the High Mas— The keeper had complete power over us. But he delegated that power, permitting the senior members of the prison to punish junior members."

Frowning, Mr. Sobel said, "I'm not sure whether some of the senior members here could be trusted with that sort of power, sir."

"Well," said Layle, giving what he thought was a reasonable response, "in that case, why should they be permitted to hold high rank?"

Mr. Sobel cast him a look, too brief to be interpreted, as he paused in front of a door. "Here we are, sir."

Layle had already figured that out. Screams were emanating from the door opposite to the one that Mr. Sobel was opening: hoarse, desperate, pleading, screams that made his body thrum in a delightful manner. He waited, heart pounding, to see what lay within the empty rack room.

Again, Mr. Sobel stepped aside to let him inside. Layle's eyes had already adjusted to the darkness of the corridor; he took a quick inventory of what lay upon the dark ceiling and walls. The instruments were plentiful: brands, bores, thumbscrews, leg-locks, and many more. A few of the instruments he had known were missing, though: no iron chair, no pulley —

—can hear that the prisoner has returned to his hoarse crying. "Please," the prisoner whispers. "Oh please, oh please, oh please. Letmedieletmedieletmedie—"

"Sir? Sir?"

The darkness of the Hidden Dungeon's rack room faded from his eyes, leaving him staring at the darkness of the Eternal Dungeon's rack room. For a brief moment, he thought he would be sucked into the dreaming again; then he managed to wrench the rack room's door toward him, slamming it shut.

This time he could not hide his trembling. Mr. Sobel touched him lightly on the shoulder, asking, "Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm fine." He just managed to keep himself from thrusting Mr. Sobel against the wall; instead, he slipped out from under the guard's hand. "I've been travelling too much; I've barely received any sleep for the past few days." This much was the truth. "And it's well past midnight. . . ."

"Well, sir, the High Torturer has placed you on the night shift, but it takes some time to get adjusted to that." The guard's voice was sympathetic. "If you'd like to rest now, you can make an early start tomorrow evening."

"That would probably be best." In the dimness of the corridor, he surreptitiously rubbed the sweat off his palms, trying his best to ignore the scream nearby. The scream did not come from his dreaming; he need not fear it. "Where am I staying?"

Mr. Sobel hesitated before replying, "I'll show you to your room, sir."

"There's no need; I can follow your directions." The quicker he was away from observation, the better; he was perilously close to vomiting.

"It's no trouble, sir; if you'll just come this way . . ."

"Oh, by all that lies underground – I'm going to bed! Do you want to join me there?"

Shock shattered Mr. Sobel's expression. For a moment, Layle feared that the guard had recognized Layle's oath – obscure though it was – as Vovimian in origin. Then Mr. Sobel said stiffly, "Sir, I would need permission from the High Torturer—"

Recognizing his error belatedly, he cut off the response with a slicing gesture. "I wasn't serious in my offer."

Mr. Sobel began to speak, then evidently thought better of it and lowered his eyes.

Mr. Sobel's reactions – his clear distaste at what he thought Layle wanted, his willingness to obey orders, his submissive gesture – were not helping Layle in his attempt to regain control of himself. He snarled, "Well, show me the room, then, so that you can be on your way."

"I'm sorry, sir." The guard did not look up. "I'm under orders to share quarters with you."

Layle decided, after a moment's reflection, not to kill him. It was not the guard's fault if the High Torturer failed to trust Layle – and why should the High Torturer trust him? In the last few moments, Layle had received all the confirmation he needed that he was a danger to this dungeon. "Fine," he said crisply. "But I need to lie down. If you wouldn't mind . . ."

"Of course, sir." The guard's voice turned solicitous once more as he guided Layle out of the corridor, into another one, and past two separate

sets of guards.

Layle waited until they had reached a different part of the dungeon – one where serving-women strode freely, much to his dismay – before he spoke the thought that had been growing in his mind. "Are guards forced to sleep with the torturers here?"

"Not forced, sir," Mr. Sobel replied quickly. "The High Torturer would never stand for that."

Layle made no reply. After a time, as they reached a side corridor that was free of traffic, Mr. Sobel added in a low voice, "It's well known among the guards that, if certain torturers ask for such favors from you, and if you refuse, it's unlikely that your career will advance in this dungeon."

Layle thought about this at length as they made their way through the endless maze of corridors. Anything to keep his mind off the women they had passed. Finally he said, "The *Code of Seeking* requires the torturers to assist murderers and rapists in recognizing and repenting of their misdeeds. How can any torturer guide a prisoner to true repentance for rape when the torturer himself has bullied a guard into his bed?"

He looked over at Mr. Sobel, who was staring straight ahead at some faraway destination. Finally the guard said, without looking Layle's way, "I'm sorry, sir. I don't have an answer to that question."

CHAPTER THREE

The apartment in which he was placed was divided into two rooms. His own room, he discovered with relief, had a door with a lock.

Remembering Mr. Sobel's set of keys, Layle took the added precaution of propping a chair under his doorknob. He had pledged himself not to kill anyone here, since the Code did not permit that, but he could not be sure whether Mr. Sobel felt himself to be under a similar obligation. The guard might decide that Layle remained a threat to his bed-honor.

With the door safely barred, Layle carried out his usual nightly routine of checking his bedroom for traps and poison. He did not yet know how high the murder rate was between torturers here, and until he knew, he would take no chances. He had been the most talented apprentice to enter the Hidden Dungeon in recent years; all the other youths' hands had been against him, once they had realized that he was a future contender for the position of High Torturer.

Here he would be lucky if the Codifier permitted him to clean the floors, but the other young torturers could not know that. So he searched diligently, but the bedroom was clean of all murderous items, perhaps because it ordinarily served as Mr. Sobel's bedroom. Mr. Sobel himself was spending a night on the sofa in the next room, which he had termed his parlor.

Layle surveyed the bedroom, trying to decide how to spend the next few hours. The *Code of Seeking* required junior torturers who were assigned to the night shift to be on-duty from the end of dusk shift to the beginning of dawn shift, other than a brief break for a midnight meal. At this time of year, in early autumn, that meant his shift lasted roughly ten hours. A further four hours – the length of the dusk shift and dawn shift combined – were set aside for meals and leisure. That left the junior torturers with a luxurious ten hours in which to sleep.

Layle required only six hours of sleep. Seeking a way to entertain himself, he brought out the Code and began browsing through it. This time he did so with a critical eye, searching for ways in which the Code could be exploited to bring about abuse.

There were many. After a while, Layle sought out a pencil in the room and began making careful notes of how an unscrupulous member of the dungeon – himself, for example – could follow the rules of the Code, yet destroy other members of the dungeon . . . including the prisoners.

He must have fallen asleep in the process. When he slept, he dreamt of his old workplace, and of what he had done there.

He awoke, shivering from cold sweat, just as he was on the point of spurting his whammer. He was so very close . . . but once awake, the image of a battered prisoner was taken from him, and he knew that he was in a place where he could not carry out such deeds.

Not because it was impossible to do so. He knew that now. He knew that he could commit every crime in the Yclau law books and get away with it here. That meant he was more of a danger to this place than he had contemplated upon his arrival.

He fell into fitful sleep again, and this time he dreamt, not of his past prisoners, but of the prisoner awaiting him in the breaking cell. He would find some excuse to send away Mr. Sobel, or else he would find a way to bribe or intimidate the guard; Mr. Sobel, who had arrived here with honor shining upon him, had clearly had his honor gradually stripped from him under the corrosive influence of his fellow workers at the Eternal Dungeon. So Layle would exploit Mr. Sobel's weakening ability to tell right from wrong, would strip the prisoner of his clothes and his defenses, would use all the instruments in the rack room on him, would end with the instrument of his own body . . .

Again he awoke in the moment before he would have spurted. His baubles ached unendurably. Shivering, he knelt down and began building a fire in the grate.

This must not continue. It had happened every night since he had left the Hidden Dungeon, with the result that he had barely received any sleep. To a certain extent, he could offset that with the training he had received to remain clear-headed when called upon to torment a prisoner for many hours. But if this continued, he would soon be falling asleep at his work.

And the dreamings when he was awake were a worse threat. How could he break the rapist of the Queen's niece if he was sucked into a dark dreaming of abuse every time that he contemplated torturing a prisoner?

He sat back on his haunches, watching the flames lick the wood, and remembering that he must wean himself from this comfort, since the torturers' living cells contained no stoves and presumably no fireplaces. The autumn-cool dungeon was considerably warmer than the winter streets he had slept on as a child; he was unlikely to die of pneumonia here, sleeping under the warm blankets.

But the coldness inside him could not be eradicated so easily. He had realized that on his way to the Queen's palace – had realized that he had established habits too deeply rooted to be weeded immediately. Even as he outwardly vowed to remain loyal to the high principles of the Code, the dark desire within him rebelled. And the form that rebellion was taking was unending images of what he had done and what he might do. Dreams when he slept; dreamings when he was awake.

And now temptations to act on those dreamings, having realized how easy it would be to continue his old life here.

"This isn't why I came here," he murmured as he stood up. "If I had wanted to continue serving Hell, I could have stayed in the Hidden Dungeon."

The charcoal glowed red, like the eyes of Hell, watching, waiting.

Since an early age, he had served the High Master of hell – whose name could only be spoken in the presence of the damned – and had been formally dedicated to the god when he reached his journeyman years. Hell was the patron god of all the torturers in the Hidden Dungeon. Layle Smith in particular had reason to be grateful to the torture-god who had granted him such great talents.

And now, by fleeing from his work for Hell's representative, the King of Vovim, Layle had broken his oath of loyalty to the god. It occurred to him that he had not prayed since he had made the decision to leave the Hidden Dungeon. How could he pray to a god he had spurned?

But there were other gods in the world. And staring down at the red eyes of Hell, Layle knew what he must do.

He raised his face and his hands toward heaven, awkwardly, having never taken this position of prayer before. He whispered, "Mercy, I do not deserve your grace—"

And then he stopped. What else, after all, could he say to the goddess Mercy?

He thought hard, for so long that his arms began to ache, but he did not lower them. Finally he added, "I broke my oath of service to your Brother . . . but I believe that you are the one who guided me to this dungeon. If I am wrong, I will accept any punishment you deem proper for my broken oath. But if I am right in believing that you sent me here for your own purposes, please show me how I may serve you."

Yes, that was good; that was a proper petition from someone in his situation. He lowered his arms, feeling relieved. He had thought himself alone in his struggles here, but if Mercy had enticed him away from his work for Hell, then she must have some plan for him. He merely had to figure out what it was.

o—o—o

Mr. Sobel was sitting in an armchair, absorbed in a newspaper, when Layle emerged from the bedroom near dusk, his body wrapped in a dressing gown he had found in Mr. Sobel's wardrobe. The uniformed guard did not look up as he entered.

Frowning, Layle asked, "Am I interrupting?"

"Mm?" The guard remained absorbed in the paper. "No, no – I'm just wasting time with the gossip columns."

He was reading one of the scandal sheets, Layle saw. Layle considered the situation for a brief moment; then his eye flicked round to the objects in the parlor.

A minute later, Mr. Sobel stiffened. The paper dropped from his fingers. His gaze, after a brief moment of shock, turned solid as steel.

Seeing all this in the mirror facing the two of them, Layle quickly withdrew the knife he had placed against the back of Mr. Sobel's neck. "*Now* am I more interesting than the newspaper?" he enquired in a mild voice.

Mr. Sobel's gaze remained like steel, but his mouth twisted into the faint shadow of a smile. "You have a rather dramatic way of making your point, sir."

"If you think I'm dramatic, you should have met my former employer. He would have had your privates chopped off after that performance."

"I'm not on duty, sir." His gaze glacial now, the guard stood and turned to face Layle.

"No, thankfully. If I'd been a prisoner, you'd be dead." Layle tossed aside the butter-knife.

The guard considered him for a long moment before asking, "How old did you say you were, sir? Eighteen?"

"Eighteen, and a bit more experienced in such matters than you are, unless you grew up in the sort of neighborhood I did."

Mr. Sobel's expression was sliding subtly into puzzlement. "You sound high-born, sir."

"It's a lengthy tale. Is that for me?" He pointed toward the uniform draped over the sofa.

Mr. Sobel did not respond for a moment. He had not yet shaved, his jacket and vest were off, and his cravat was not yet tied at his neck. He looked much like the prisoners that Layle had questioned over the years. Finally the guard replied, "Yes, sir. It arrived a little while ago. It's the uniform for a torturer-in-training . . . since there is no uniform for situations such as yours. You can have it tailored to your needs."

Layle examined the clothing, not yet permitting himself the pleasure of examining the whip beside the uniform. He could see at a glance that it was shorter than the whips he had wielded in the past, but he prided

himself on being able to learn to use any instrument of torture he was given.

As for the uniform, he could see no difference between this uniform and the ones that the other torturers had been wearing, except that the black hood had a thin red strip of cloth at the hemline. Examining the loose stitching, he said, "The red shows I'm in training?"

"Yes, sir. The strip is removed once you've completed your training."

"Why red?"

He turned to see that Mr. Sobel was regarding him quizzically. "For death, sir," replied the guard. "Because you are dying to your old life."

He managed to stop himself from asking further revealing questions about the hood. Dimly he remembered that the seal of the Queen of Yclau, which he had seen in the palace, was tri-colored. "Is that why the corridors are painted green?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual manner.

"Of course, sir. The green reminds us that our goal is the prisoners' rebirth."

Red for death, green for rebirth . . . that meant that the blue in the seal must stand for the transformation from death to rebirth. He wondered where he would see that color.

The red silk of the rest of the uniform still looked too rich to him, but now he could understand the color's symbolic purpose. Red meant death in this land, just as black meant death in Vovim. Well, at least the hood here was black. He ran his fingers over the face-cloth. The torturers in the Hidden Dungeon wore no hoods; the prisoners were forced to confront the sneering faces of their torturers. The Code's requirement that the torturers' face-cloths be lowered whenever torture took place was for humanitarian reasons, as well as a symbolic reason: the torturer's identity at such moments was supposed to be less important than the role he was playing in assisting the obstinate prisoner to rebirth.

He felt vaguely surprised that the Yclau were capable of understanding symbolism. He had already been shocked to learn – while in the midst of seducing one of the palace guards – that most people in the queendom did

not attend the theater regularly, and that only the rich adorned their rooms with artwork, other than an occasional print torn from a scandal sheet. Yet somehow, against all odds, the Eternal Dungeon had retained understanding of the important part that symbolism could play in a man's life.

Without even realizing that his mind had travelled this far ahead, Layle asked, "Is there worship here?"

"Sir?" Mr. Sobel sounded puzzled again.

Layle could have cursed himself. Of course there was no worship here. The Yclau were atheists; everyone knew that. "I meant . . . if prisoners arrived here from foreign lands . . ."

"Oh." The guard's voice relaxed. "No, sir, we don't have any foreign worship services in this dungeon, though the prisoners are welcome to pray in whatever manner they wish, provided that their prayer does not break the Code. However, we do hold a daily service, during the dusk shift, for dungeon workers. Would you like to attend?"

A service for atheists? It seemed that the Eternal Dungeon would be a place of continual surprises. "Certainly," Layle responded. "Let me dress first."

o—o—o

Half of an hour later, his toiletry and dressing were completed, and he had rejected Mr. Sobel's offer of a ginger bun to break his fast. He knew what was proper, even if Mr. Sobel didn't; one did not eat before entering the presence of the gods.

Feeling odd in his new riding boots, which did not quite fit, he accompanied Mr. Sobel. They returned to what Mr. Sobel termed the "inner dungeon" by way of the corridors they had taken the previous night, and once again they walked through the dim stretch of corridor between the rack rooms. But they did not pause this time; their destination evidently lay at the end of the corridor, where two doors guarded an arched doorway. The doors were painted blue.

The service had already begun by the time Mr. Sobel ushered Layle inside. There were perhaps two dozen guards and torturers inside the spacious room, far fewer than Layle had seen in the entry hall. The room, like the entry hall and the Codifier's office, was untamed cave. The room was brilliant with candlelight; Layle's head swum from the smell of beeswax and smoke. In the portion of the room near the doors hung a pulley, though it did not appear to be there for the prisoners; it was attached to what appeared to be a great manhole.

The guards and torturers encircled a great fire-pit in the ground. If there was a leader here, Layle could not identify him; everyone was reciting the same words. Some men read the words from books; others appeared to have the words memorized.

Mr. Sobel pulled a book from his jacket pocket, opened it, and handed it to Layle, pointing to the appropriate line. Layle, who had never attended school, was a slow reader, but he managed to follow what was being said, for the words were familiar. They were taken from the *Code of Seeking*, though altered to address some unknown being who was never named. Or perhaps, he thought, concentrating hard on what was being said, the words were merely expressed hopes.

". . . that once reborn, our prisoners may renew their lives, gaining strength from what they have suffered in the past . . ."

The words were as fine as any worship liturgy Layle had attended in the past, but he thought to himself that whoever designed the service could have done more to impart drama to what occurred. He said as much to Mr. Sobel as the service ended and people left the room, again without any indication that a leader was conducting the service.

"You attend traditional chapels, do you?" Mr. Sobel smiled. "Yes, I suppose our services look dull and anarchic compared to the traditional rites, sir. The service is still being shaped; we've only been conducting it for a couple of decades now. And we're having to figure matters out on our own, because ours is the only service that bases its rite, not only on the traditional Sayings, but also on our *Code of Seeking*."

Everything in the service that Layle had heard he remembered reading about in the Code. Now intrigued, he said, "That must have been a difficult

composition. I don't own a copy of the Sayings myself; do you have one you can lend me, so that I can refresh my memory?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Sobel promptly. "You'll find my copy in the topmost drawer of my bedroom bureau. You're welcome to keep it; I haven't read the Sayings for years."

"I suppose," said Layle, looking about at the candles again, "that you stopped reading them around the time you came to the Eternal Dungeon."

Mr. Sobel began to speak, then hesitated.

Layle walked over to examine the candles more closely. They were on ledges that were carved from the cave wall itself – ledge upon ledge, all the way to the domed ceiling, and nearly all of the ledges held candles, though only the lower candles were lit. "Do you attend these services, normally?" he asked.

After a while, Mr. Sobel said, "No, sir. The services are voluntary. And I work long hours—"

"I expect that this is fairly low in your priorities." He trickled his fingers over the candles, which were blue.

He had always had a talent for attacking in such a manner that the other person could not accuse him of doing so. Mr. Sobel's face had flushed red, but Layle ignored this; he was reading the hand-written labels in front of the candles. After a while he asked, "Are these the prisoners?"

Mr. Sobel said stiffly, "Yes, sir. Prayer-candles are set out for every prisoner who has been executed for his crimes. This is our Crematorium for the prisoners; you can see the ash-pit over there." He pointed to what Layle had mistaken for a manhole.

"And do you light candles for the prisoners yourself?"

A pause, and then: "No, sir. The torturers do that."

"Are the guards not permitted to light candles for their prisoners?"

This time, Mr. Sobel did not respond. When Layle looked back at him, Mr. Sobel was gazing round at the flames, as though seeing something he had

not seen for a very long time.

o—o—o

"And what about the junior night guard?"

"Sir?" Mr. Sobel appeared more startled than this question would warrant.

"Doesn't the *Code of Seeking* require that both a junior guard and a senior guard be on duty at all times when a prisoner is within his cell?" Layle asked patiently as they reached the corridor where the breaking cells were located.

"Oh. Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel relaxed, having evidently decided that he was not being asked too esoteric a question. "The High Torturer has lent you his junior and senior day guards, since he is between prisoners at the moment. As for the junior night guard, I'm afraid he's unavailable – he's on leave this week from his regular duties. I can request a substitute for him, if you wish."

"Only if the Code requires that." Searching a prisoner with one eyewitness would be bad enough. Searching it with two . . . "I'd like a chance, though, to meet your regular junior—"

"Watch out!" called Mr. Sobel, halting suddenly.

There was a cry, inarticulate; then someone bellowed, "Stop him!" and shouts resounded along the corridor. Layle, his reflexes as swift as usual, hardly needed the alarm; he had already taken in the image of the furiously racing man.

Fortunately, the man was running in the wrong direction, away from the dungeon's exit. Layle waited until the man was alongside him; then he grabbed the escaped prisoner and slammed him brutally against the wall.

The prisoner's cry of pain put an end to the guards' shouting. Layle, pressing his groin against the prisoner's backside as he twisted the man's arms agonizingly behind his back, heard the prisoner sob. Layle reacted in the same sedate manner as he might have if he had heard a bride give a cry upon being entered for the first time on her wedding night. He barely noticed the stiffness at his groin; his mind was on his work.

—leans over, as though to inspect the body, and begins to bring his weight down upon the prisoner—

Shaking, he pulled himself back. "Mr. Sobel," he said, unable to hide the tremor in his voice, "please take charge of the prisoner."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel was staring at him, his brow furrowed in puzzlement. Layle wondered how long he had been sucked into his dreaming. But Mr. Sobel was too much of a professional to ask questions in front of a prisoner. He grasped firmly the prisoner, who was trying to take this opportunity of transfer in order to escape again. Leaning forward, Mr. Sobel murmured something in the prisoner's ear. Whatever threat he made was evidently effective, for the prisoner went limp.

Layle was too far away to hear the threat, for he had backed as far away as possible. His heart was still pounding; his shaft was still cock-high. He had a terrible feeling that, if he approached the prisoner, his dreaming of abuse would merge with reality.

"Sir? Shall I return your prisoner to his cell?" asked Mr. Sobel.

His prisoner. Oh, gods.

"Yes, please. Thank you, Mr. Sobel." It was surprising how handy long-ago lessons in etiquette from his mother could be in situations like this; his automatic response sounded calm.

"Come with me, please." Evidently, Mr. Sobel had decided to take his cue from Layle's politeness; he was no harsher in addressing the prisoner than the circumstances demanded. He propelled the prisoner down the corridor, toward his cell, as Layle trailed behind, at a safe distance.

They were met halfway by a pair of guards who looked surprisingly unconcerned, considering that they had evidently been the men who had let the prisoner slip past them. "Sorry," said one of them, speaking to Mr. Sobel rather than Layle. Then, taking another look at the prisoner: "Are you okay?" The question was addressed to the prisoner.

The prisoner, his face screwed up in pain, made no reply.

"Nothing broken, I think," murmured Mr. Sobel. "If you would open the door to the cell, please . . ."

"How did the prisoner get past you?" Layle asked the day guard who had spoken – probably the senior day guard, since he was the elder of the two.

"Er . . . not quite certain." The senior day guard was avoiding Layle's eye. So was the junior day guard, who was steering the prisoner into the breaking cell.

Layle was left with the quite distinct impression that the day guards had deliberately released their prisoner. His lips tightened grimly. If the High Torturer wished to test a new torturer's abilities by ordering that a prisoner be released at the very moment that his torturer approached the breaking cell, that was the High Torturer's privilege. But Layle very much hoped that this was the last bit of interference he would receive from the High Torturer, until the prisoner was broken.

He glanced at the day guards, and then drew aside Mr. Sobel. "A question. Am I permitted to give orders to the High Torturer's day guards?"

"Of course, sir. They are your guards this week."

"But I'm not permitted to give orders to you."

Mr. Sobel hesitated. All around them, the corridor was settling back to its usual, disorderly self; apparently, even the attempted escape of a prisoner had not jolted the other guards into an awareness of the consequences of laxness on duty. "Sir, I believe that the High Torturer may have exaggerated somewhat for effect when he spoke to you of my role in relation to you. It's true that, as a senior guard, I have the authority to intervene if a low-ranked torturer acts in a manner that clearly endangers the prisoner's life or soul. But barring that, I am under your command."

"Good," said Layle crisply. "Will you be accompanying me inside the breaking cell?"

"That is for you to decide, sir, but I am required to take notes on your performance. Although there is a watch-hole in the door, it would be easier for me to take notes if I were inside the cell."

Layle thought about this. If Mr. Sobel had the means to spy on him while he was in the cell, it made little difference, from Layle's perspective, whether the guard stood inside or outside the cell. And he had to admit that it was something of a relief to know that Mr. Sobel would be there if anything went wrong.

He decided to say this to Mr. Sobel; he felt he owed the guard that much, after the knife-against-the-neck episode. Mr. Sobel misunderstood him, though, and said carefully, "From what I've seen of him so far, sir, this particular prisoner is unlikely to attack you."

Layle stopped himself in time from asking, "Can you guarantee that the opposite won't happen?" He was letting his nerves get to him. Just because he was plagued by these evil dreamings, that was no reason to question his ability to control himself. Control was the hallmark of a torturer; if he lost that, he lost his profession.

Turning, he dismissed the day guards, saying that he hoped to have the opportunity to talk longer with them at dawn, when they returned for their next shift. They were continuing to avoid his eye, but at least they were not insolent toward him. After they had gone, Layle waited impatiently as Mr. Sobel checked the watch-hole before opening the cell door.

The prisoner was standing toward the end of the cell, well beyond the stove. He was a man about Mr. Sobel's age, fair-haired, neat in appearance, even though he had been stripped to a prisoner's clothing: shoes, shirt, and trousers. He was wearing suspenders. Layle – who had once nearly been strangled by a desperate prisoner who thought of a creative way to use his suspenders – thought to himself that one manner in which the *Code of Seeking* made life especially hard for the torturers and guards was by permitting the prisoners to keep most of their clothing. He could think of a dozen places within that clothing where this prisoner could have hidden a blade. Well, he would just have to hope that the guards at the dungeon gates had searched the prisoner thoroughly. Or – since this seemed unlikely, based on the current level of achievement in this dungeon – he would have to hope that his quick reflexes would save him if the prisoner attacked.

He looked the prisoner in the eye, trying to judge his character. The prisoner returned his look, but not in a way that seemed to suggest defiance; indeed, he appeared nervous, which was hardly surprising after Layle's attack on him in the corridor.

Layle decided that, for both their sakes, it would be best to overlook that episode. He opened his mouth and realized, to his horror, that he didn't know what to say. How did a torturer in the Eternal Dungeon begin a session of searching? He could not recall that the Code had anything to say on this matter.

He tried again. "Good evening, Mr. . . ."

"Howard," Mr. Sobel murmured in Layle's ear. He was in the midst of pulling from the inside pocket of his jacket the memorandum book and pencil he had brought out the day before.

"Good evening, Mr. Howard," said Layle.

The first flicker of an expression appeared on the prisoner's face. It was gone nearly before Layle had seen it, but that one second was enough to allow him to recognize the emotion it conveyed. Layle added, "Your name *is* Howard, isn't it?"

"Er . . . That was the name I was born with, sir. But I usually use my foster parents' name—"

Layle waved him to a stop. He had no interest in hearing the tale of the prisoner's life. "If your name in the legal records is Howard, that is how I will address you. Mr. Howard, I am your torturer."

Mr. Howard looked less than happy at this introduction – which, Layle was prepared to admit, was not the most comforting introduction that a prisoner could receive. Nonetheless, Mr. Howard seemed to take his cue from Layle's polite greeting; he said in turn, "How do you do, sir?"

Layle thought to himself that any prisoner who began calling his torturer "sir" from the very start was exactly the sort of prisoner he liked working with. "I am well, thank you. Mr. Howard, you realize, by my title, that I have the power to torture you."

Mr. Howard flicked a glance at Mr. Sobel before returning his attention to Layle. "Yes, sir. That has been made quite clear to me."

So Mr. Sobel had already prepared the groundwork here? Layle felt a momentary irritation that the guard had not told him this. Though to be fair, Mr. Sobel must have spoken to the prisoner the previous day, before Layle's arrival. At any rate, it wouldn't hurt to repeat whatever message Mr. Sobel had given the prisoner; he could guess that Mr. Sobel had sought to impart to the prisoner the unique nature of the searching he was about to undergo. "I want you to understand, Mr. Howard: what concerns me most is not your pain, nor even your death. What concerns me most is your soul. If I must use torture to break you, I will do so. But I would prefer that matters not go that far. If you are honest with me – if you are completely truthful – then I promise I will not torture you to obtain a confession. But you must not lie to me."

The prisoner had been gradually relaxing through this speech. Now he said, "Yes, sir. That's been made quite clear to me as well."

Layle eyed him, wonder whether the prisoner was complacent because he thought Layle could be easily manipulated, or was genuinely relieved to be offered an alternative means by which to make his confession. "You have been accused of raping the Queen's niece."

"Yes, sir, I know that."

"Do you have anything to say in response to that charge?"

The prisoner hesitated before saying, "Only that I didn't do it, sir."

It was the refrain of every prisoner who had ever been placed in Layle's hands. Layle had made it himself, when he was arrested for murder. "We shall see. Tell me about yourself, Mr. Howard. What is your age?"

"Twenty-six, sir. The same age as— That is, I think I'm around the same age as your guard there."

Mr. Sobel, quite properly, said nothing. He had slipped his right hand in his pocket and was fidgeting there. Layle wondered whether Mr. Sobel was doubting whether the new torturer had the ability to tell when he was being

lied to. Many men did doubt this, who hadn't previously seen Layle at his work.

Layle continued, "And your work?"

"Sir?" The prisoner looked uncertain.

"What sort of work do you do?"

The prisoner hesitated again before replying, "I am employed by the Queen."

"What sort of tasks are you assigned?"

Once more the hesitation. "I assist with any tasks my supervisor deems necessary."

"What sort of work does your supervisor—?"

"Look," said the prisoner suddenly furious, "I don't have to put up with this sort of bloody probing. Ask me about my supposed crime, or shut your trap!"

There was a long, deadly silence in which the prisoner seemed to realize what he had said. Or perhaps Layle's face was revealing a bit too much. At any rate, the prisoner's face drained of blood.

He did not immediately apologize, though. A shame, that.

"Mr. Sobel, a word with you. Mr. Howard, stay where you are. Do not move." Layle retreated to the front of the cell, keeping a careful eye on the prisoner who, for the moment, did not appear to be eager to make any sudden moves. Mr. Sobel, tucking away his memorandum book, followed Layle, then leaned forward to listen to him.

"Mr. Sobel, how many lashes do I give him?" Layle spoke softly as he pulled his looped whip from the hook on his belt. He felt on solid ground here; the Code did not merely permit but actually required the torturers to beat their prisoners if the prisoners were insolent. Layle would not be breaking his word to the prisoner; this torture was for discipline, not in order to obtain a confession. Any schoolboy who talked back to his schoolmaster in such a fashion could expect a flogging, so presumably the

prisoner would recognize the nature of his error as well. Layle could not remember, though, how much of a beating the prisoners were supposed to receive.

"That's for you to decide, sir."

On the point of unrolling his whip, Layle stared. "Are you saying that I can beat him for as long as I want?"

For the first time, the guard looked uneasy. "Sir, the High Torturer trusts the good judgment of the men working under him."

The High Torturer trusted the good judgment of *torturers*? Gods above and below. "And the Code has nothing to say on this?"

"Only that a beating is required in situations like this, sir."

This was absurd. You placed a vulnerable prisoner in the hands of a man who, in all likelihood, had taken up the profession of torturer because he enjoyed seeing other men suffer . . .

. . . and then you placed no limits on him. None whatsoever.

"Mr. Sobel," said Layle, almost in despair now, "I am not accustomed to using my own judgment in so important a matter as this. Can you offer me any advice, based on your past experience with prisoners in this dungeon?"

He half expected the senior night guard to grow contemptuous at this confession of ignorance, but Mr. Sobel, if anything, looked relieved to have his expertise called upon. "Well, sir, I don't have a torturer's ability to judge character, but my impression is that the prisoner spoke as he did simply out of fear. I don't think he's the type to normally be insolent. So I think a light beating would be in keeping with this situation."

"You mean fewer lashes?"

"I mean beating him lightly, sir, as opposed to hard."

Layle had no idea what the difference was between a light beating and a hard beating. A beating was a beating, as far as he knew. "And how many lashes?"

"Perhaps . . . five, sir?" The guard spoke tentatively, obviously believing that Layle would overrule him with a higher number.

"Thank you, Mr. Sobel. You may bind the prisoner." Layle watched the guard approach the prisoner and murmur some sort of order to him. Layle usually performed his own bindings, but Mr. Sobel seemed to enjoy being part of the proceedings . . . even though the guard had no natural lust for pain. That was clear from the manner in which he conducted himself.

Layle had met a few men like Mr. Sobel in the Hidden Dungeon. Not many; all of them ended up refusing to obey orders eventually, so their lives did not last long. It was odd to find himself in a dungeon where a man with a sensitive conscience would not only be permitted to live but would be given high rank. Mr. Sobel's place in this dungeon – Layle thought as he slid the whip between his fingers to check for accidental knots – was indication enough that the *Code of Seeking* reigned supreme here.

Meanwhile, Layle needed to figure out what the difference was between a light beating and a heavy beating – a difference that would no doubt have been clear to him had he been the Yclau torturer that Mr. Sobel assumed him to be. He dared not ask the guard so revealing a question, but he considered the issue as Mr. Sobel helped the prisoner to strip himself bare. The prisoner was making no last-minute protest, though his face remained pale; he compliantly turned toward the wall and allowed Mr. Sobel to bind his wrists to the whipping ring.

Layle had been the most accomplished whipster in the Hidden Dungeon. He had beaten hundreds of prisoners. He should not feel as though he had just been pulled out of a collegiate lesson-room and thrust into a primary-school lesson. He eyed the naked prisoner, calculating where he would lay the lines of pain, trying to figure out how to keep the beating light—

—prisoner stands bound and bloody against the wall, his skin mutilated in dozens of places by the blades and brands that his torturer has used upon him. His hands are tied high above him, and he stands upon his toes, his feet barely reaching the ground. He is naked, of course—

"Mr. Smith?"

With a shudder, he emerged from his dreaming. He awoke to see that Mr. Sobel was standing beside him and staring, not at Layle's face, but at his groin. The guard's expression was troubled.

Layle had to suppress the instinct to clap his hands over his groin, like a young boy caught for the first time with a stiff whammer. "Mr. Sobel," he heard himself say in a voice too soft to be heard by the waiting prisoner, "do you know how to flog?"

Mr. Sobel managed to tear his gaze away from Layle's groin. "Yes, sir. The High Torturer is in charge of the discipline of disobedient torturers and guards. At his command, I do all the disciplinary beatings in this dungeon."

"Then you will do this one." Layle handed him the whip.

Mr. Sobel stared at him, though he took the whip in an automatic manner. "Sir, you are the torturer . . ."

"I am delegating this duty to you. Is there anything in the Code that would prevent me from doing so?"

Mr. Sobel licked his lips nervously. "No, sir. Not that I know of. But the torturers in this dungeon usually do their own work."

"My work, Mr. Sobel, is to search the prisoner and care for his soul. I can more easily do that if my mind is not preoccupied with lesser matters, such as whether I am applying a lash properly."

His words all sounded very reasonable. He wondered whether they were in fact reasonable. All that he cared about at the moment was getting that whip out of his hand before his dreaming should return. What if he began dreaming he was killing a prisoner with the lash at the very moment that he was beating this prisoner?

No, it was unthinkable that he should beat this prisoner. As long as his dreamings continued to recur, he must refrain from torturing – refrain from even touching – any prisoner who was placed under his care.

"The torture must occur in this case," he said aloud, "but there is no reason you should not do it, since you are trained in these matters."

"Yes, sir, I see." It was difficult to tell what Mr. Sobel thought of this change in plans, but he did not seem inclined to argue further. "Shall I start now?"

"Wait." Layle looked at the prisoner again, naked against the wall. His whammer jumped as he thought of what he could do to a prisoner in that position – had in fact done to past prisoners.

Mercy preserve him. Next time he would make sure that any prisoner beaten in his presence kept his trousers on. It was just as easy to beat a half-naked prisoner, and safer too. "Keep your beating above the waist, Mr. Sobel."

"Yes, sir."

"Five light lashes, as we agreed. Don't spend too much time between lashes. The quicker this is over, the better." Better for the prisoner, and better for Layle.

He could not watch this. That would be too close to his dreamings, to see the lash landing on the prisoner's naked flesh. But neither could he retreat from this cell; he was in charge here.

Cautiously, Layle approached the prisoner, who was trying to look over his shoulder. At the last minute, Layle steered himself clear of the prisoner and positioned himself further along the wall that the prisoner was bound against.

Yes, this was good. It was difficult to see the prisoner's back from this angle, but he could clearly see the prisoner's face. Faces were revealing; Layle had often regretted that he could not watch his prisoners' faces in the same moments that he was beating them.

Perhaps, then, delegating this beating to Mr. Sobel need not be an admission of defeat. Perhaps it could be a way for Layle to obtain new information.

"Shall I proceed, sir?" Mr. Sobel was well within Layle's field of view. The guard had unbuttoned his jacket, so as not to restrict the movement of his torso, and his arm was back, ready to throw the first lash. His position was

textbook-excellent; Layle decided that he need not fear whether the beating would be done properly.

He turned his gaze back to the prisoner, who was staring at him, still white-faced. Layle knew that even high-born Yclau boys could be beaten in school, but perhaps this one had always done his lessons properly, for he looked as though he were going to faint at any moment. Then Layle realized that the prisoner had not overheard the earlier conversation between his torturer and guard; he did not yet know how heavy a punishment he was going to receive.

"It's all right, Mr. Howard," said Layle. "You will only receive five lashes – light lashes."

This was ridiculous. One did not comfort a prisoner at the very moment one was torturing him – not unless one was seducing the prisoner at the same time. Layle had certainly comforted many a prisoner for that reason; it had always amused him to persuade a prisoner to offer up his body voluntarily, out of a belief that his torturer loved him.

Layle was not trying to do that here . . . and yet, as a bit of color returned to the prisoner's face, he heard himself say, "Simply bear the pain, Mr. Howard, and it will be over soon. —All right, Mr. Sobel, you may begin."

He spared a quick glance at Mr. Sobel as the first lash came down. Mr. Sobel's jacket was swinging in an odd manner; his right pocket seemed weighed down by some heavy object. But the weight did not impede him; the lash landed correctly. Layle quickly turned his attention back to the prisoner.

The prisoner took three lashes without making a sound; then he broke down into tears. Layle, still following some inner instinct he had not hitherto known, held up his hand toward Mr. Sobel. The guard stopped beating the prisoner immediately.

"Mr. Howard," Layle said softly, "do you understand now how important it is for you to conduct yourself in a civil manner?"

Still struggling to contain his tears, the prisoner nodded.

"Then there's no need for the last two lashes. —Thank you, Mr. Sobel. You may release the prisoner." Layle pushed himself away from the wall. His groin was still aching from need, but it hardly seemed to matter now. He was learning that a part of himself that he had despised – the part that spoke false, soothing words to prisoners – could be used to bring genuine good to the prisoner.

If the prisoner repents, he will find his evil transforming to good. . . . The Code had spoken the truth. Until now, Layle had possessed no real proof that the Code was true; he had simply held faith that it was true.

And now his faith had borne fruit. His evil was transforming to good.

He felt humbled rather than exultant, as though he had been a minor player in a magnificent drama that brought the gods to life. He looked at the prisoner, wondering – with deep, reverent calmness – what was the next step he should take in this drama.

The prisoner, still bound to the ring, was biting his lip against the pain of the previous lashes. If Layle had been in the Hidden Dungeon, he would have used this opportunity, when the prisoner was still vulnerable, to force a confession from him. There was nothing in the Code that would have prevented Layle from doing so.

But Layle was not here primarily for a confession. His main goal was to help the prisoner recognize and repent of the misdeed he had done. A small thread of trust now bound the prisoner to Layle; Layle knew this, from all his experience of falsely wooing prisoners.

He would not break that trust by taking advantage of the prisoner. He would allow the trust to grow until the prisoner, of his own volition, offered his confession and recognized his need to offer recompense for his evil.

As Layle had done.

"Mr. Howard," Layle said quietly, "I will give you time to think now about what you have done in this cell and to think back upon anything you have done in the past that you may now regret. Once you have had time to

collect yourself, we will continue our conversation. . . . Do you have a handkerchief?" He asked Mr. Howard this as Mr. Sobel released him.

Looking understandably bewildered by this approach from his torturer, the prisoner said, "No, sir. I mean, yes, but I used it early this morning, when I was waiting for you." His mouth quirked as Mr. Sobel handed him his own handkerchief. "I'm not as brave as everyone seems to think."

It was a confession, Layle reflected, that the prisoner would not have offered a few minutes before. "Tears are nothing to be ashamed of; the measure of a man lies in his deeds, not in whether he feels pain and fear. I will look forward to talking with you later."

"Thank you, sir." There was something in the prisoner's eyes that Layle could not quite identify. It was not until he reached the door that he realized what it was.

The prisoner felt pity for him.

o—o—o

Snow entered the Eternal Dungeon. It was stamped from boots, was shaken from mittens and scarves, and drifted down the steps from some open window in the palace above. At the bottom of the steps leading to the dungeon gates, blocks of ice were being placed on what looked like an elaborate, open-doored ice box, complete with drainage buckets, while some of the male laborers sculpted a ring made of ice.

Thunderstruck, Layle had paused to watch. Near him, a torturer grumbled, "The least they could do is let us have a festival night off from work."

"The prisoners don't have the night off," another torturer pointed out.

"It's not as though the prisoners can eat festival food," contributed a third with a laugh.

"Festival?" said Layle, turning toward Mr. Sobel, who had just emerged from the High Torturer's office after speaking privately with him.

"Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel smiled as he surveyed the scene. "Blessed New Year."

"New year?" exclaimed Layle, disconcerted. "It's the tenth month – two months short of the new year."

Mr. Sobel turned a puzzled eye toward him; then his expression cleared. "Oh, do you follow the Vovimian calendar near the border? We celebrate the old festivals here. The Commoners' Festival has begun." Then, seeing that Layle still didn't understand, he waved his hand. "The first snow of the year. The beginning of the cycle of death, transformation, and rebirth."

Layle looked over at the ringed ice sculpture again, and at the laborers carving it. An entire festival dedicated to the commoners? What a strange land Yclau was.

Yet to celebrate commoners, he reflected, was no stranger than comforting prisoners. Indeed, the two might be linked: most prisoners, in Layle's experience, were commoners. Only a few high-born prisoners – such as his current one, judging from the man's accent – had the ill luck to be arrested for a crime without being able to ease their way to freedom by way of bribes or family influence.

"Only in a land like this," he murmured, watching as some of the torturers went over to wish the laborers a blessed new year.

Disconcertingly, Mr. Sobel understood what he was saying. "Oh, yes, only in a nation like this could there have grown such concern for the prisoner and the commoner. I've heard it said that Yclau is too class-bound a society, yet we're no worse in that respect than Vovim . . . and I've never heard of any Vovimians celebrating the existence of their commoners."

"Nor the existence of their prisoners," murmured Layle. He felt something move deep within him – a feeling of longing and reverence such as he had experienced in the moment that he had finally grasped what the *Code of Seeking* had to offer. He turned to Mr. Sobel. "When does the festival end?"

"Traditionally, it extends from the first evening of snow until the beginning of the next evening."

Layle nodded. "Then we will let our prisoner alone for the rest of tonight. See to it, please, that he is sent appropriate food for the festival."

For a moment, Mr. Sobel simply stared at him, speechless. Then the guard said, "You are taking time off from work, sir?"

Layle shook his head. "I have no permission to do so. No, you and I will spend the rest of tonight in the rack room. I want to investigate the instruments there, and this is my opportunity to do so. But the prisoner should be permitted to celebrate so important a night and day."

"I see," said Mr. Sobel slowly. "Very well, sir. If you will wait here, I will arrange for festival food to be delivered to the prisoner."

Layle nodded without looking as Mr. Sobel departed. His gaze was fixed on a group of young guards who were pelting each other with snowballs.

In their play, they looked very young indeed – boylike. Layle tried to remember a time when he had played in the snow lightheartedly. He must have done so at some time in his life, but those days were long gone. Orphaned, he had become a thief at age ten, a murderer at age twelve, a rapist at age fifteen, and had soon after become a professional torturer.

Somewhere along the way, he had cut himself off from all amiable interactions with the rest of humanity. Only Master Aeden, stubbornly affectionate, had managed to break through Layle's barriers . . .

Master Aeden was gone forever from Layle's life. And so Layle stood here, amidst the convivial warmth of the torturers and guards and laborers who were greeting one another with arm-shakes and embraces and even kisses, and he felt the coldness of the empty space surrounding him.

o—o—o

The rack room had less drastic an effect on him this time. Layle thought that it must be because of what had occurred to him in the breaking cell. He looked round at the old, familiar instruments, the toys of his youth, and he knew, with an awareness he had lacked during the previous visit, that he could not use most of these deadly instruments on his prisoners.

Still following his instincts, he began to strip himself of the top half of his uniform.

Mr. Sobel, turning away from having locked the door behind them, paused. "Sir?" His voice was cautious rather than fearful, which Layle took as a good sign.

"Mr. Sobel," said Layle, tossing away his jacket and vest and shirt and undervest, "I want you to beat me."

Mr. Sobel gaped at him; then, with seeming reluctance, his gaze lowered to Layle's groin again.

Layle felt a chuckle escape him. "No, Mr. Sobel, I am not one of those men who enjoys receiving pain. You will find that out soon enough," he added dryly.

"But . . ."

"I need to understand what the difference is between a light and heavy beating. In my pride, I would have beaten the prisoner in ignorance of that difference, rather than confess to you my lack of knowledge." As Layle spoke, he turned and placed his forearms onto the cold stone wall of the rack room. "Even though you are now conducting any necessary beatings, I still must know all that you know about the use of the whip in this dungeon, so that I can supervise you properly. So I'd like you to give me a beating – first a light beating, and then a heavy one – so that I can understand what you're talking about."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice was subdued as he took Layle's whip in hand once more. "How many lashes, sir?"

Layle tried to think, amidst his growing fear. He had very little tolerance for harsh pain; he knew that from his time under torture by Master Aeden. On the other hand, he had a very high degree of curiosity about how instruments of torture worked. That had allowed him to hold out against Master Aeden far longer than the master torturer had expected, simply because Layle had known that, when he gave his confession, Master Aeden would cease to demonstrate on Layle's body how his instruments worked.

So Layle thought he could hold out against whatever pain Mr. Sobel inflicted on him, for the sake of the lesson he was about to receive. The only question was how many lashes would constitute a lesson.

"Twenty light lashes," he said finally. "As for the heavy lashes . . . Try twenty of those as well. We'll see whether that's enough."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Sobel sounded quite sober now, which led Layle to wonder whether he had just committed a folly. Would twenty heavy lashes bring him close to death?

He had no time to wonder, for the first lash landed.

Layle had first learned to inflict pain with a whip under the instruction of Master Aeden, with assistance from his other apprentice, who was close to journeyman age. Layle had soon exceeded both of them in skill. But the first lesson he had learned had served as the base axiom for all that followed: you lashed a prisoner as hard as you could.

Now, feeling Mr. Sobel's gradual build-up of intensity, Layle wondered how he could have accepted so foolish a proposition. He knew well enough that he could vary the intensity of how a lash landed; he had taken advantage of that fact when dispensing disciplinary beatings on wayward guards, allowing them more pain or less, depending on how well he liked them or how big a bribe they gave him. It had simply never occurred to him to do the same to the prisoners.

But now he realized that a whip was an instrument very much like the rack – one that could be used to bring small pain or large. The small pain could be short or extended, depending on what sort of pain the prisoner was most likely to break under; or one could simply build up the pain, higher and higher, to a crescendo of agony . . . and thereby allow the prisoner enough time to make his confession before the worst pain.

"Mercy," Layle gasped into his arms.

Mr. Sobel paused. "Sir?"

"Continue." It took all Layle's strength to speak that single word.

"Sir, I've finished the light beating. Are you sure that you want me to continue with the heavy beating at this point? The Code recommends a break in time between different punishments, in order to give the prisoner a chance to confess—"

"We'll continue later, then." The words were cowardly; Layle did not need an opportunity to offer a confession. But if Mr. Sobel continued, Layle was very much afraid that he would begin pleading with the guard to stop.

Besides, he reminded himself as he pushed himself shakily away from the wall, he had a prisoner to search. He was aching now, and he expected that it would be even harder to sleep tomorrow than it had been to sleep today, but he thought he was likely to make a nearly full recovery by tomorrow night. On the other hand, if Mr. Sobel had given him a heavy beating . . .

No, it was best to digest now what he had learned and save the additional lesson for later. Layle was already thinking that there was no reason why a beating should take only two forms, light and heavy. Surely there could be an intermediate state between the two? Three types of beatings multiplied by however many lashes were safe . . . It was like seeing a whole new pallet of paints that he had not known existed. Now smiling, he spared a look at Mr. Sobel.

"Thank you, Mr. Sobel; that was very educational. I understand now what you were saying. The Eternal Dungeon knows about aspects of the whip that I had not been taught at my previous workplace."

"I'm glad I could be of assistance, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice remained quiet as he rolled up his whip. He was eyeing Layle with uneasiness. Layle supposed that most men did not smile broadly in the rack room.

"You will have to teach me later how the shorter whip length affects how you swing the lash. In the meantime . . ." Layle looked round at the instruments. "I don't need these."

Mr. Sobel paused in the act of hooking his looped whip around the sheathe of his dagger; Layle made a mental note that the belts in this dungeon needed to be redesigned to allow guards to carry both daggers and whips. "Sir?" said the guard cautiously.

Layle spread his arms to indicate the instruments on the wall of the dungeon. "These are crude instruments, incapable of the level of control that you have just shown me that the whip possesses. Indeed, many of them bring too great a degree of danger of death." His eye lingered somewhat wistfully on the Swelling Globe.

"I'm not sure, sir, that all of the prisoners can be broken by the whip alone," Mr. Sobel said with obvious reluctance.

"No, the whip is too familiar an instrument to inspire fear in men who have been beaten often for disciplinary reasons," Layle agreed. "Besides, the Code decrees that the whip shall be used to dispense discipline. We need another instrument that can be used as a means to force a confession, and that will strike fear into the prisoner, yet can be controlled as well as the whip." His eye roved the room until it settled in one place. He nodded to himself, satisfied.

"Mr. Sobel," he said to the guard, whose uneasy expression was edging into horror, perhaps because he had guessed what Layle's next words would be. "Has anyone ever taught you to rack a prisoner?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Another bedtime of sweet dreams of abuse, another bedtime of unmet needs. Layle, leaning over the grate in an effort to dry his sweat-soaked body, thought to himself that Mercy was proving to be as exacting a master as Hell had always been.

And without any of the rewards. Turning away abruptly from the fire – which was beginning to evoke memories of firebrands – Layle spent a moment scrounging in Mr. Sobel's bureau drawer before he located what he was seeking: the "Sayings" that Mr. Sobel had spoken about after the dusk service. Sitting down on the bed, Layle set out to compare the Sayings with the *Code of Seeking*.

The Sayings turned out to be a document worth reading. Layle gathered, from the book's introduction, that different volumes of the Sayings, produced in different regions, held somewhat different contents. This edition included, not only the Sayings themselves – thoughts about rebirth from a long-ago wise man – but also Yclau legislation that had stemmed from the Sayings. Much of the legislation was dead now (the footnotes told him), but the wise man's beliefs about death, transformation, and rebirth continued to live on in the queendom's system of justice. Not just the Eternal Dungeon, but all the lesser prisons of Yclau, required that prisoners be permitted an opportunity to express repentance for the crimes they had committed. All of the magistrates who judged prisoners were required to allow prisoners, or their representatives, an opportunity for defense. All of the magistrates were encouraged to seek alternatives to death sentences for prisoners who had repented and renewed themselves – had transformed and been reborn, in the parlance of the Yclau. And children were to be judged less harshly than adults, because their rebirth into a new body had only just begun, so they had not yet had time to establish a pattern of misdeeds.

Layle snorted at the latter bit of piety but turned with interest to the next section, which contained what the volume's editor termed the "myths" of the Yclau religion. These were – Layle recognized at once – the Yclau's sacred dramas.

How odd to find that the Yclau handed on their dramas, not through play-acting on a stage, but through stories told from one generation to another, until the stories were finally written down. Odder still to find himself reading sacred dramas in which the gods played no role. The central figures in the dramas were two friends – or were they love-mates? The editor refused to take sides in this long-standing argument. One man drained his own blood in order to be reborn from the world of afterdeath; the other man, weeping at the loss of his friend, assisted the first man to this death that brought renewed life. The sacrifice of both men opened the door to allow others the chance to be reborn.

One feature that the Yclau sacred dramas held in common with the Vovimian sacred dramas, Layle reflected as he sat back from his studies, was that love and strife played a central role in both. In Vovim, the dramas centered around the love and strife between Mercy and Hell. Here in Yclau, the love and strife was between the two mortals who struggled their way to a better understanding of the nature of transformation.

But much remained alien about the Yclau's dramas. The stories said that the two men had been born in the same year and held the same rank – two love-mates who were the same age and the same rank? Layle mentally filed away this information for further investigation. It would help to explain, perhaps, why Mr. Sobel was so disturbed by the activities of the torturers who exploited the guards under their control. Layle himself had only been concerned at the fact that the torturers were misusing the beloveds they ought to have been protecting, but if the Yclau sacred dramas encouraged men to take love-mates of their own rank . . . Yes, the dramas provided much material to think about.

And yet, he reflected, he had already known the dramas, the legislation, the Sayings. For turning back to the Code, he saw that every section of the Code, every sentence, every word was drawn from the religious beliefs of the Yclau. Without understanding those beliefs, he had found the *Code of Seeking* to be a puzzling document; now the Code seemed nothing more than a logical outcome of the Yclau religion.

Layle rested his chin on his fist, frowning. Until now, he had considered himself to be a Vovimian torturer coming to work in an Yclau dungeon. The fact that his mother was Yclau had played no role in his decision to

leave Vovim, other than the fact that it meant he already knew the language here and could therefore pass himself off as Yclau.

Now, though, he was beginning to realize that it was a miracle he had managed to fool Mr. Sobel into thinking he was Yclau. The gulf between the Yclau religion and the Vovimian religion was wide . . . and what was worse, it was now clear that he could not be a torturer in the Eternal Dungeon without believing in Yclau's religious tenets.

His first impulse was to pray. To ask Mercy what he should do, to beg her to explain why she had sent him to work in a dungeon where he could not work without repudiating her. But Mercy preferred men to seek her assistance only when they had exhausted their own efforts. So he forced himself to think instead as he rose and paced the floor restlessly, like a prisoner in isolation.

Was the Yclau religion truly in opposition to the Vovimian religion? That was the crux of the matter. For in reading the Sayings, Layle had gradually become aware that the Yclau were not atheists after all. The Sayings had nothing to say, one way or the other, about the existence of the gods. It seemed to Layle that there was nothing in the Sayings that would prevent a man from believing in the gods while believing in rebirth as well.

But what of the Code? Layle remembered what Mr. Sobel had said: "The prisoners are welcome to pray in whatever manner they wish, provided that their prayer does not break the Code." Try as he might, Layle could think of nothing in the Code that would forbid him from praying to Mercy. On the contrary, she seemed admirably suited as a patron god of this dungeon.

But what of Hell?

That was the center of Layle's difficulty. He had been trained, by no less than his Yclau mother, that Hell and Mercy were inseparable – that you could not worship one without worshipping the other. Had his mother repudiated her Yclau beliefs? Or had Layle's father forced her to teach tenets to their child which she opposed herself?

No, Layle could not believe that. Unhappy though his mother had been at being abducted to a strange land and forced to live as the concubine of a

married man, she had never shown any sign that she was unhappy at raising Layle as her child. And surely she would have been unhappy if her training of Layle had included falsehoods.

The bedrock of his life – the immovable foundation of his life – had always been that his mother was a good woman, that she had loved him, and that she had spoken truth to him. He could not destroy that bedrock without destroying what little good lay within him.

His mother had been Yclau, and she had worshipped Hell. Layle still could not see how the worship of a god who tortured mortals eternally could be reconciled with a belief that all mortals were offered the opportunity for transformation and rebirth. But his mother had been wiser than him. Perhaps he would simply have to wait for this part of her wisdom to reach him.

"Mercy," he murmured, "I will continue to worship you, for I know that you dwell in this dungeon. Forgive me if I do not yet understand what tribute I should pay to your Brother . . . but I hope you will reveal that truth to me in time."

He sat down and looked again at the Code and at the Sayings that had inspired the Code's creation. He was not sure what steps he should take to become a member of the Yclau religion – essentially, to become Yclau. Perhaps Mr. Sobel could tell him, if Layle could figure out a subtle enough manner in which to make an enquiry. In the meantime, it seemed to Layle that memorizing the *Code of Seeking* would be an appropriate way to begin.

He started to reread what had become for him his own sacred drama.

o—o—o

"Layle," said the High Torturer, "how are matters going with your prisoner?"

Layle and Mr. Sobel had just emerged from the evening service at the Crematorium, somewhat delayed because Mr. Sobel wished to light candles for a number of his past prisoners. Now, as Mr. Sobel dismissed the day guard from their shift of guarding the cell of Layle's prisoner,

Layle turned to respond to the High Torturer, who had been grilling the day guard on some matter or another.

"Matters go well, sir," Layle replied briefly. If the High Torturer wanted details, he could ask for them.

"Any confession yet?" the High Torturer pressed him.

"Not as of yet, sir. I'm still trying to determine whether the prisoner feels remorse for what he did." This was quite true. Layle had always sought out remorse in his prisoners, because it was the easiest way to pry a confession from them. Now he simply had a new reason to do so.

"Well, step up your timing," the High Torturer said sharply. "We have other prisoners that require searching, you know."

"Yes, sir. I was wondering . . ."

"Wondering what?" The High Torturer, who had been about to speak to Mr. Sobel, turned back, frowning.

"Whether we have any more information on the prisoner than what his crime is."

The High Torturer's frown deepened. "Are you saying that you are incapable of obtaining any pertinent information yourself?"

Layle counted to ten before replying. Master Aeden had taught him this trick early in his apprentice years, when the master torturer learned that Layle's natural reaction to criticism was to strike the other person to the ground. "No, sir," he replied evenly. "But the *Code of Seeking* says that the torturer should take into account the prisoner's full background in determining the course of searching. If I knew the prisoner's background . . ."

"He raped the Queen's niece," snapped the High Torturer. "He was caught in the act, by the Queen herself. That's all she saw fit to tell me. If you have any more questions, you can search *her*."

Envisioning how the Codifier would react if he approached the Queen again, Layle remained silent. The High Torturer turned to say to Mr. Sobel, "All is ready inside. You may proceed with the searching."

For all the world, Layle thought sourly, as though Mr. Sobel were in charge of this searching. He watched as the High Torturer departed, offering a greeting as he passed Mr. Longmire, who had emerged from the breaking cell on the other side of the corridor, just as a new pair of guards arrived there.

Mr. Longmire nodded his greeting back, then said to the newly arrived guards, "Fetch me some coffee, for goodness' sake. After fourteen hours of searching, I need something to keep me awake."

"Both of us, sir?" said one of the guards doubtfully. "Your day guards are off-duty now."

"Do you think I can't handle a prisoner on my own?" Mr. Longmire flashed them a grin, and they hurried off. "You too," he said to the day guards, then: "No, wait, Argus. I want to talk to you."

Looking exceedingly uncomfortable, Argus paused on the point of departure as his fellow day guard disappeared down the corridor. Argus was fair-haired in the manner of most Yclau, with long, blond eyelashes and big eyes that made him look even younger than he was.

Layle, seeing the look that Mr. Longmire gave Argus, turned his back and pretended to be absorbed in the conversation that Mr. Sobel was holding with the High Torturer's day guards, concerning whether their prisoner was showing loss of appetite at mealtime. He could hear all that Mr. Longmire said, however, even though the torturer kept his voice low.

After a minute's consideration, Layle murmured to Mr. Sobel, "Stay here."

Mr. Sobel flicked a glance at Mr. Longmire, then looked back at Layle and nodded. He returned to his conversation with the day guards, raising his voice.

Mr. Longmire broke off his low-voiced conversation as Layle approached. "What do you want?" he asked sharply.

"Whatever he's getting." Layle directed his smile at Mr. Longmire, leaning his hip, in a sinuous fashion, against the wall. He hooked his thumbs over his belt and let the remaining fingers trail, in an obvious manner, across the hard lump in his trousers.

After a moment, Mr. Longmire dismissed Argus with a jerk of the thumb. Argus left, relief clear on his face. Mr. Longmire seemed not to notice his departure; his gaze was fixed on Layle's groin. "You approach me like this, after what you did to me in the entry hall?" he said. "You're a bold one."

Layle continued to smile at him as he reached up to release the top two knots of his shirt. "I have to be, when there's competition."

Mr. Longmire gave a bark of laughter. "Argus? He's no competition."

"Doesn't he want you, then? Foolish boy. Perhaps, though, he's toying with you in hopes that you'll grant him favors. I know his type." Layle allowed his voice to grow contemptuous.

Mr. Longmire glanced toward Layle's guards, who were continuing to discuss the prisoner's dietary habits. Then he shrugged. "They always want something. I'm usually generous in return."

Layle's smile deepened. In the same sweet, coaxing voice he had used before, he said, "I won't need bribes."

"Won't you, now?" Mr. Longmire gave his body a lingering look. "Too bad you're on the night shift."

"Maybe I'll have the day shift eventually. In the meantime, you can always persuade Argus to keep you warm."

This time, Mr. Longmire did not even look in the direction of Layle's guards as he grinned. "No doubt. But I'll see that your shift is changed – you can count on that."

"I'll look forward to it." Rolling his hips like water, Layle walked back to his guards. Mr. Longmire, evidently forgetting that he was supposed to be guarding his prisoner, strode down the corridor toward the entry hall, casting a glance or two at Layle. Layle took care to smile at him until the other torturer was out of sight.

Then his smile disappeared with the swiftness of an execution knife. He turned. Mr. Sobel had already sent the day guards on their way; he looked soberly at Layle.

"You heard?" said Layle.

"Every word," replied Mr. Sobel quietly.

"But you already knew." Layle spoke flatly.

Mr. Sobel shook his head. "Not for certain. I had suspicions . . . but I'm so high-ranked that the other guards have been reluctant to name names to me."

"Nobody likes a tell-tale," Layle agreed. He wondered briefly what Mr. Sobel would do with this new-found knowledge; then he dismissed the matter from his mind. He had other concerns. He was still cock-high from the thought of his seduction, which was not the way in which he wanted to enter a breaking cell.

Well, it was unlikely this would be the last time he would have to question a prisoner while his shaft was stiff with need. Taking a deep breath, he gestured to Mr. Sobel to open the cell door.

o—o—o

The second night of searching was going no better than the first. As Mr. Sobel studiously took notes and occasionally slipped his right hand into his pocket, Layle tried to figure out how, by all the minor deities, he was supposed to establish trust with the prisoner at the same time that he grilled the prisoner for information.

Layle knew now what it was that the prisoner was hiding from him: the nature of his employment. But Layle did not yet know in what way Mr. Howard's employment had played a role in his rape of the Queen's niece.

In the meantime, the prisoner was being tediously honest.

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I am employed by the Queen."

"What sort of tasks are you assigned?"

"I assist with any tasks my supervisor deems necessary."

"What sort of work does your supervisor do?"

"He is employed by the Queen."

By the end of the morning, Layle was resorting to a game of Thirty-three Questions.

"Are you a courtier?"

"I don't know the law that well."

"But are you a courtier?"

"No."

"Are you a healer?"

"I swoon at the sight of bad injuries."

"But are you a healer?"

"I've never joined the Guild of Healers."

"Answer my question yes or no. Are you a healer?"

"No."

"Are you a soldier?"

"Do you mean in the army?"

"I mean any type of soldier."

"I've never been called that."

Scenting blood, Layle said, "But you're classified as part of the military? Are you one of the Queen's Guard?"

"Sweet blood, no." The prisoner sounded amused. "I've never held that type of privilege."

"No idle oaths, please, Mr. Howard."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Layle thought about the amusement. Could it be that, despite his high-born accent, Mr. Howard had been given a low-ranked job? "Does your work involve cleaning rooms?"

"Not thus far." The amusement in the prisoner's voice increased. The scent of blood faded from Layle's nostrils.

He said, "You realize that, if you continue to obstruct me, I can resort to harsher methods."

Mr. Howard raised his eyebrows. "I shouldn't think that would be necessary, sir. I'm replying to your questions honestly."

His tone said, as plain as can be, "Resort to brute force if you must. That will show how poor you are at this game of wits we're playing."

Layle said nothing. After a moment, the prisoner turned a bit pale, and Layle realized that his own face was revealing too much of what he desired to do to the prisoner.

"Sir, I won't lie to you." The prisoner's breath was too rapid. "Please understand, I'll answer honestly any questions you ask."

And Layle had promised that, if the prisoner was honest, there would be no torture. Very well; he would keep his promise. "Let us continue discussing the military, Mr. Howard. . . ."

o—o—o

"Is this yours, sir?"

They had returned to the apartment after Mr. Sobel gave his daily report to the High Torturer. Layle had been ready to toss himself immediately into bed. He had never realized how exhausting it could be to search a prisoner when you did not permit yourself the pleasure of torturing him.

But Mr. Sobel had needed to enter Layle's bedroom first in order to retrieve a clean shirt for himself. Now he emerged from the bedroom, holding up the *Code of Seeking*, its pages open. Layle stared blankly at the book in the guard's hand until he recalled the marginal notes he had made of all the ways in which he could break the Code.

He lifted his eyes to Mr. Sobel's face. The guard's expression was so thoroughly stripped of identifiable emotion that Layle began to think that Mr. Sobel would be the perfect, unbreakable prisoner; Layle could never tell what he was thinking.

"Yes," Layle replied tersely. He would not seek to justify what he had done. After all, he could have glibly lied about his motives for the notes if he were indeed the intended abuser that he appeared to be.

Mr. Sobel looked down at the volume. "You seem to have a thorough understanding of the Code, sir." His voice was as burnished of emotion as his face.

"Hardly," replied Layle. "I make new discoveries every time I read it."

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Sobel in so plaintive a voice that Layle laughed.

"I don't consider it to be a useless document," he assured Mr. Sobel as he rested his hand on the back of a chair where Mr. Sobel had laid his jacket.

"I hope not, sir," said Mr. Sobel, looking down at the book and wincing at whatever note he read there. "You seem to have a talent for pinpointing weaknesses."

"It's part of the job of a torturer," Layle pointed out.

"You have more a talent for that than other torturers I've known." Mr. Sobel carefully laid the volume aside.

Layle made no reply. He knew that he was more skilled than other torturers his age; older torturers had told him that. He had never seen the point of exhibiting false modesty.

Though he was beginning to understand the nature of true humility. Remembering this, he asked, "Do you have any suggestions for additional notes?"

"Perhaps a few, sir." Mr. Sobel sounded troubled, as well he might. He seemed to be struggling for words; but at that moment, there was a knock on the door. "Excuse me, sir."

Taking the hint, Layle returned to his bedroom, with Code in hand, and closed the door. He contemplated barring the door again but changed his mind. Whoever else in this dungeon might be a danger to him, he doubted now that Mr. Sobel was. If anything, Layle was the danger to Mr. Sobel: he was bringing turmoil to the guard's peace of mind.

Some things never changed. Setting aside thoughts of all the trouble he had brought to Master Aeden, Layle lay down on his bed, still fully clothed, and contemplated the ceiling. He supposed that there were some men – Mr. Sobel might be among them – who felt their world crack and crumble if something good that they followed was shown to be flawed. While Layle had not initially set out to find flaws in the Code, he was not particularly surprised to find them. Even the gods made mistakes; the sacred dramas revealed that. The only question facing him was how to put these mistakes to rights.

And in order to know that, he needed more information than he currently possessed about the state of the dungeon.

All this while, he was vaguely aware of a conversation taking place in Mr. Sobel's parlor. With his acute hearing, Layle caught a word or two of what was said: "arrest" and then "release" and then "junior night guard." And then there was the sound of a door closing, followed by silence.

And more silence.

Too much silence, Layle thought. He rose from his bed, trod soft-footed over to the bedroom door, and listened. Nothing; no scrape of a chair, no sound of a breath. He eased the door open with the same silence that he had used in the years when he was a thief.

The parlor was empty.

The only sign of Mr. Sobel was his jacket; evidently, he had left with such haste that he had forgotten that article of clothing. Layle first bolted closed the door to the corridor; then he eased his fingers into the right-hand pocket of the jacket, taking care not to move any of the contents there.

It turned out there was only one item in the pocket. He slid it out far enough to be sure of what he felt.

Mr. Sobel had been carrying the Codifier's pistol.

o—o—o

They heard the sound of Mr. Sobel's voice outside the door, saying something to his junior night guard. The High Torturer rose from his seat.

The Codifier waited, fire in his eyes.

The two guards entered, escorting the prisoner. He was as they had taken him, still in the uniform of a torturer. The junior night guard had a tight grip on him, though there was no sign that the prisoner had resisted arrest.

The High Torturer waited until the door to the Codifier's secretary's office was closed before speaking. "Do you know why you're here?"

"No." Longmire gave a smile that did not quite touch his eyes. "But I think I know how this will end."

CHAPTER FIVE

Midnight was well past by the time that Layle returned to Mr. Sobel's rooms, but the guard was still absent. Grateful for that fact, Layle snatched himself a snack from Mr. Sobel's stash of edibles, then went into the bedroom in order to change out of his clothes.

For the past eight hours he had worn, not the uniform he had been issued, but the black shirt, black trousers, and scuffed work-boots he had worn during his flight from Vovim. He had worried at first that he would be mistaken within this dungeon for an escaped prisoner, but he had passed unnoticed; the normal clothing of a prisoner was no different from the normal clothing of many commoner laborers.

And that was what he had been for the past eight hours. A commoner, newly emigrated from Vovim and still speaking in a thick accent, who had moved boxes, split logs, blackened stoves, and undertaken many other menial tasks. All the laborers in the outer dungeon had seemed willing to accept his story of what he was; Layle had mentally added lax security in the outer dungeon to his long list of the Code's failings.

The hardest part had not been passing himself off as a commoner – after all, that was how he had started life. Rather, the hardest part had been working in the same rooms where serving-women passed to and fro. He could not say why women were a special temptation to him. As far as he knew, he had started off as a normal boy, attracted equally to males and females. But the scarcity of females in the Hidden Dungeon had perhaps heightened his appetite for womanly flesh. All he knew was that, by the time he grew old enough to want to explore brothels, his first choice had been the women's brothels.

But not his last choice. Layle reminded himself that, short of committing rape or torture upon them, he could not hope to receive satisfaction with any of the women in this dungeon – nor any of the men or youths, for that matter. The limits of his ability to satisfy his desires were a firmer boundary than the border between Vovim and Yclau. In a word, he could not spurt his whammer unless he was raping or torturing his victim.

No, pleasures of the flesh would be denied to him from this point forth; he firmly turned his thoughts from such matters, not allowing himself to feel

the old, odd yearning for an exchange of love. He had more important matters to think about than carnal pleasures.

The outer dungeon, where a few of the guards lived and where the laborers worked, was as rife with corruption as the inner dungeon. Layle had witnessed backbiting, bribes, blackmail, and every other vice imaginable.

Yet overlaying it all, just as in the inner dungeon, there was a sense among the laborers that they dwelt in a special place, with special rules. Nobody had had a bad word to say against the *Code of Seeking*, though everyone seemed to think that it was impossible to follow completely the Code's ideals.

Layle had gradually come to the conclusion that part of the problem lay with the High Torturer. The laborers respected the High Torturer. According to them, he overlooked peccadilloes, and even ignored large misdeeds, provided that those misdeeds were not flagrantly waved in his face. He was a tolerant employer, a good man to work for . . . though Layle caught whispers suggesting that the High Torturer's tolerance had its limits, and that it was exceedingly unwise to anger the High Torturer.

Layle, sitting in bed and flipping his way through the Code, could see how the Code itself encouraged the High Torturer to adopt his policy of tolerance. The problem, Layle decided, was not so much in the tolerance as in the arbitrariness of it all. Nobody in the outer dungeon seemed quite sure which deeds would cause them to be punished. This left the dungeon workers on edge, and also inspired a gambling attitude: if you didn't know which deeds were considered wrong, you might as well draw a bone and take your chances. Hence the spread of vice within the outer dungeon.

The problem with the Code, Layle decided, was that it was not concrete enough. It provided numerous passages which spoke of high ideals, but often it did not back those ideals with practical rules. The fact that the torturers decided for themselves how much torture a prisoner should receive was a sign of how badly the Code needed to place limits on the dungeon workers. The Eternal Dungeon, though it remained a place of high ideals, was currently in a state of anarchy. Sooner or later, the anarchy was bound to erode the ideals.

Scrutinizing the Code in hopes of finding new insight, Layle reflected to himself that it was strange that no torturer or guard in this place had reached similar conclusions. Perhaps that was because, according to the laborers, the inner-dungeon workers were a motley crew. Though all high-born or of the mid-class, the torturers and guards came from dozens of backgrounds. Mr. Longmire had owned a tavern prior to becoming a torturer; Angus had worked as a business clerk; the High Torturer's junior night guard had flirted with the idea of taking up the theatrical arts before his parents persuaded him to adopt a more respectable calling. From the gossip that Layle had overheard and encouraged that night, he gathered that very few of the inner-dungeon workers were what he would term "professionals": men who had chosen prison work as their lifelong profession. Even the torturers, whose oaths bound them to the dungeon until death, seemed to treat torturing as a sideline to their off-duty leisure activities.

What the Code needed, Layle decided, was more passages about the dungeon workers. There needed to be passages that instilled pride in the torturers and guards and laborers for the unique, precious work they were doing. The men and women of the dungeon needed to recognize that they were the only people in the world who were doing this work: they alone held the privilege of helping to search prisoners by means unknown in other prisons. Even if other prisons should imitate the Eternal Dungeon – and Layle gathered from the gossip that the Eternal Dungeon was not without influence – this place would still be the hub for all experiments in prison reform. The Eternal Dungeon was the heart of the prison world.

But how to make the dungeon workers recognize that? Layle frowned as he reached the title page of the Code. The authors' names were written there – more than one name. The last name in the list gave him pause.

He turned the page to where the date of the publication was listed and found, not one date, but many.

Original edition, H. Wallace et al., in the year 202 by the Tri-National Calendar.

First revision, R. Platt, 228 TNC.

Second revision, N. Douglass, 255 TNC.

Third revision, B. Harrison, 283 TNC.

Fourth revision, T. Jenson, 313 TNC.

'"T. Jenson,'" Layle murmured to himself. "How can the Code be improved if its latest author is also the dungeon's High Torturer? You're not likely to listen to me, High Torturer, if I point out to you all the mistakes you've made."

Nonetheless, the multiple publication dates cheered him. There was a note on the bottom of the page which stated that the Code must be updated in every generation, to reflect the consensus of the inner-dungeon workers about any changes that needed to be made. So there was a chance that the current Code's flaws could be removed during the next revision.

Layle thought hard. He did not know who the next reviser of the Code would be, and on reflection, it didn't matter. What mattered, if he understood correctly, was that there be "consensus" among the torturers and guards over how to run the dungeon.

At the moment there was consensus, but all in the wrong direction: the consensus was that the current Code worked well. How could Layle hope to change that belief?

He must have fallen asleep some time later, for he dreamt again of a prisoner being mercilessly tormented. But the prisoner was a kitten found on the street, and its torturer was four years old.

His mother, discovering him with the dying kitten, listened to his shouts and curses as he angrily denied that he had done anything wrong. At length she said, in that cool manner she had when she was very disappointed with Layle, "If you must be a torturer, my dear, the least you can do is be a polite torturer."

He woke then, startled, and looked over at the water-clock in the corner of the room. Two hours were left before the dusk shift began. Stretching, he rose and then went over to fetch his uniform. As he did so, his mother's words echoed in his head: "The least you can do is be a polite torturer."

He paused, his hand on the uniform. He had possessed a reputation in the Hidden Dungeon, not only for viciousness, but also for politeness. Master Aeden had once remarked drily that, if Layle managed to survive to adulthood without being murdered by one of his fellow torturers, he had his politeness to thank.

He thought again of the manner in which Mr. Sobel's attitude had begun to change toward him at the beginning. Was it because he had reprimanded Mr. Sobel? Or was it perhaps because he had granted Mr. Sobel the dignity of a title? And a similar transformation had taken place in the prisoner when Layle had shown courtesy toward him.

Be polite. That was what his mother had told him, and it seemed that Mercy, in sending the dream, had the same message. Be polite, be formal, act with the dignity that the *Code of Seeking* seemed to demand of him. And perhaps . . . perhaps that would make a difference.

He must not break the current Code. He knew that, without even having to think the matter through. If he began picking and choosing which bits of the Code he wanted to follow, his own life would fall into as much anarchy as the Eternal Dungeon was experiencing.

But there was nothing to stop him from doing *more* than the Code demanded, was there? While following the current Code, he could circumscribe stricter boundaries for himself than the Code demanded. He could set an example. And in doing so, perhaps he would influence other workers in this dungeon.

He turned away from the uniform and began rereading the *Code of Seeking* to determine what new limits he should impose on himself.

o—o—o

Layle arrived at the entry hall that evening to find himself ignored.

He had half-expected everyone to gawk when he entered, but it appeared that they had heavier matters on their minds. The torturers and guards were clustered in groups, muttering with one another; the drinks and the dominoes lay abandoned. Even the Record-keeper kept casting looks toward the Codifier's office.

What finally emerged from that office was not the Codifier, nor even the High Torturer, but two guards. One of them turned away immediately, before Layle could identify him; he made his way to the door leading to the outer dungeon and departed swiftly. The other – Mr. Sobel – went over to the Record-keeper and spoke to him. The Record-keeper, without a word, rose and went over to a giant slate tablet behind him. He wrote something on the tablet; Layle was too far away to see the words. Then the Record-keeper crossed out what he had written.

All of the mutters in the hall had died out. Men were exchanging glances with one another. Most did not even bother to go up to the tablet; it appeared they already knew what was written there.

Layle caught hold of a guard who was standing on his own, staring bleakly at the tablet. "That slate-board," he said, pointing to the slate. "What is it for?"

The guard did not look away from the tablet. "It lists our prisoners and the cells in which they were searched. The prisoners whose names are crossed out have been executed."

Layle made his way slowly forward. Some young guards was jostling each other in front of the tablet, in an attempt to see what was written there, but they made way for him when they saw his hood. He stared at the new words on the tablet, which were crossed out: "A. Longmire. Codifier's office."

Beside him, the young guards were whispering.

"I heard they brought out his body at noon."

"That's a lie. No one ever sees the bodies afterwards. The Codifier has flesh-eating fish that eat them."

"Don't be a fool. He was a torturer. Torturers' ashes are placed in the Crematorium. They're prisoners, after all."

"A condemned prisoner, in this case."

"But what did he do?"

"I don't suppose we'll ever know."

"He angered the High Torturer. That's all we need to know."

"If we don't know what he did wrong—"

The speaker stopped abruptly. Layle, turning his head, saw that Mr. Sobel had joined them.

"Night shift has started," the High Torturer's senior night guard said in his usual mild voice. The other guards melted away.

The entry hall was emptying now of everyone except the night guards who were awaiting prisoners. None of them seemed inclined to talk, though several had begun to pour drinks for themselves. Layle had a vision of a drunken party following this episode.

"Mr. Smith? Why are you dressed this way?" Mr. Sobel spoke in a low voice.

Layle turned his attention to the guard. He had forgotten, amidst everything, his change of appearance.

"Sir, if you had no time in which to dress properly . . ." Mr. Sobel's voice ended on a hesitant note. Layle guessed that he was trying to reconcile the torturer's half-dressed state – no jacket, no vest, only the black shirt, black trousers, and scuffed work-boots that Layle had worn during his flight from Vovim – with the fact that Layle had lowered the face-cloth of his hood.

Layle managed to gather his wits together in order to make his prepared speech. "The *Code of Seeking* requires that face-cloths be lowered during torture. It gives no other guidance as to the use of the hood. I prefer to remain formally dressed from the moment I leave my living cell."

"But . . ." Mr. Sobel gestured toward the rest of his clothes.

"Formally dressed," said Layle, "*as a prisoner*. And I trust that, on this night, you won't protest that I and the other torturers aren't really prisoners."

Mr. Sobel's mouth twisted. "No, sir. Torturers are bound to this dungeon by their oaths of eternal commitment. And if you prefer to wear clothing

which signifies that fact . . . Well, I'll speak to the High Torturer about this. It would be best to obtain his permission."

"I gathered that." Layle did not bother to look at the tablet.

Mr. Sobel began to speak, then flicked his eyes toward the guards sitting nearby. Layle gestured again, this time toward the door to the inner dungeon, and after a moment's hesitation, Mr. Sobel followed.

The corridor was silent; for once, none of the guards there seemed inclined to chat. All were at their posts . . . except for two who were sitting on the floor, eating buns.

Mr. Sobel sighted them in the same moment that Layle did. "On your feet!" he said, striding over. "You have a prisoner to guard."

"But—" The senior day guard cut off his protest abruptly as he caught sight of Layle. "All right. Sorry."

Layle waited until the day guards were back at their posts in front of his prisoner's cell before he came forward. "I'll check on the prisoner now," he told them.

Mr. Sobel, who had been speaking in a low tone to the senior day guard, said to Layle, "Sir, I haven't had my breakfast yet . . . nor my supper from yesterday morning. Do you mind if we delay the searching for a few minutes this evening?"

Layle would have said no – the need for punctuality had been beaten into him by Master Aeden – but he still had questions to ask, and they could not be asked in the presence of a prisoner. "Very well," he said. "Let's go back to your rooms."

Mr. Sobel hesitated before saying, "I'd like to stop at the Crematorium first, sir, if you don't mind."

o—o—o

The Crematorium was empty, except for a body in the fire-pit, awaiting burning. Looking down at the blanket-covered object, Layle said, "You told the High Torturer?"

Mr. Sobel replied quietly, "I am required by my duty to report to the High Torturer everything that you say."

Layle nodded. He had expected as much. "And you reported our conversation about Mr. Longmire?"

"Yes, sir. The High Torturer told me that he hadn't been aware before now of Longmire's misuse of power."

That was a lie if Layle had ever heard one. Any fact that was widely known among the guards must surely be known by the High Torturer. Layle wondered why, if Mr. Longmire had been blackmailing guards into his bed for some time, the High Torturer had chosen this moment to take him to task.

"Is this the High Torturer's usual manner of issuing a reprimand?" Layle gestured toward the body.

Mr. Sobel hesitated before saying, "In serious cases, sir."

"And he doesn't tell anyone afterwards why he has executed the torturer or guard?" The Eternal Dungeon was beginning to feel more and more like his old workplace. He remembered how the High Master had treated one torturer who was foolish enough to protest that he couldn't torture a prisoner who was innocent. The torturer had not been allowed to die quickly.

Layle turned to Mr. Sobel, who was struggling for an answer. "At what point," Layle asked the guard, "do you stop carrying out the High Torturer's orders?"

Mr. Sobel was quiet a moment before saying, "When he breaks the Code, sir. That's where the limit lies for me. He has never broken the Code, to my knowledge – but if he did, I would not obey orders."

It was a daringly honest response; Layle appreciated that. And it was a response he could accept. What it came down to once more was that the Code needed to be revised. Mr. Sobel, it seemed, had made the same choice that Layle had: to follow the current Code, even where it was flawed. If he and Layle were in that much agreement, they could continue to work together.

"As far as the Code requires," he told Mr. Sobel, "and farther, if it is in keeping with the Code's principles."

Mr. Sobel's gaze drifted over Layle's new uniform. "As I say, sir, it would be best to clear all matters with the High Torturer."

Layle wondered how the High Torturer would react when he learned that Layle was stepping beyond the normal customs of the Eternal Dungeon. Well, there would be time enough to worry about that if Mr. Sobel turned up at Layle's door to arrest him. For now, Layle had a prisoner to break.

o—o—o

"Sir, I hope you don't mind if I say . . . That is, I hope you won't be offended . . ." Mr. Sobel trailed off a second time and bit his lip as he closed his apartment door. Layle, already standing in the outer-dungeon corridor, eyed the guard with curiosity, wondering whether he should have spoken more during the midnight meal. After all, Mr. Sobel had been Layle's host.

During the first night of breaking, Mr. Sobel had invited Layle to dine in the entry hall. No special provisions were made for the dungeon workers at the dusk and dawn mealtimes, for it was assumed that most workers would prefer to eat outside the dungeon, either in the palace above or in the surrounding city. The prisoners and torturers, who could not leave the dungeon, were served meals in their cells, brought from the kitchens in the palace.

But at midnight and noon, a light meal was served in the entry hall, so that the torturers and guards could eat quickly before returning to their duties. One visit to the entry hall during dining hours had been enough for Layle; he had watched, with appalled fascination, as a prisoner on his way to his trial – and perhaps to his execution – had been forced to weave his way between the wadded-up food balls thrown by the younger guards at each other.

Fortunately, Mr. Sobel, who was one of the few guards to live within the dungeon, kept a stash of food on hand in his rooms. At Layle's suggestion, the two of them had retreated in quiet dignity from the riotous dining in the entry hall.

Perhaps he had been a bit too quiet tonight, Layle reflected. His mind had been on the Code, trying to figure out whether he had missed anything important. He had tried an old mental game he had learned as a lad when his mother set him to memorizing the simpler of the sacred dramas: he had searched his memory for all instances of particular words within the Code, then had checked the Code itself to see whether he had missed any places where the words were used.

"Rack." Only three mentions; the Code had surprisingly little to say about this instrument of terror, other than to make analogies between the rack and the stress placed upon the prisoner's conscience.

"Innocent." The word never appeared in the Code. That was hardly surprising; Layle had gathered from various passages that any prisoners sent to the Eternal Dungeon had already been determined guilty by other authorities; the job of the dungeon's torturers was simply to obtain a confession before the trial . . . and hopefully a statement of remorse.

"Madness." Oddly enough, four passages mentioned madness, all in metaphors to describe the anarchic state of a criminal's soul.

Enough. Mr. Sobel was waiting for an answer.

"Go on," said Layle, not very helpfully.

Mr. Sobel, staring at the floor as he pocketed his key, said, "I was wondering, sir, whether you might have the inclination to speak to our healer."

Layle, who had been about to turn in the direction of the inner dungeon, stopped dead. After a moment, he said, "You have a healer here?"

"Yes, sir. He was hired by the Codifier three years ago, because the dungeon was having to call upon the services of the palace healers so often. Our healer is fairly young – he only completed his training half a dozen years ago – but he has a good reputation. He not only cares for the prisoners but also for any dungeon workers who wish to consult with him."

Without thinking much about it, Layle fingered the place on his belt where his whip had once been looped. "He works for the Codifier, you say?"

Mr. Sobel's gaze flicked up. "Yes, sir. But he's a member of the Guild of Healers. I don't know whether you're aware, sir, but all healers who belong to the guild are required to take an oath not to reveal to others what they learn from their patients, other than with the patients' permission. As far as anyone knows, the Codifier has never pressured our healer to break his oath. And I don't think David – Mr. Bergsen, that is – would ever break his oath, even under pressure."

Layle considered this. One fact he had learned during his night as a dungeon laborer was that only two torturers in the entire history of the Eternal Dungeon had broken their oaths of eternal commitment. Given that the Eternal Dungeon had now existed for a century and a third, this suggested that the Yclau treated their oaths with great seriousness.

Mr. Sobel added hesitantly, "He has a reputation, sir, for being concerned with the health of the whole man: body, soul . . . and mind."

Layle said nothing. After a minute, Mr. Sobel dropped his gaze again. "I'm sorry, sir."

"That's all right." He spoke the polite response automatically, but decided, after further consideration, that he had spoken the truth. "I appreciate your suggestion. It isn't a course of action that would have occurred to me. I'll give it some thought . . . but not until I finish with my current prisoner."

Mr. Sobel glanced up at him, his gaze opaque, and Layle wondered whether Mr. Sobel thought he was afraid of having his secret torments revealed to the Codifier before he had been accepted into training.

In actual fact, Layle was worried about what would happen to him within the healer's office. He had seen healers cut men open; would something like that happen to his mind if the dungeon healer began probing him to discover a medical cause for his dreamings? If so, it would be better for Layle to wait for a day when he was momentarily free of his duties to the prisoners.

Though perhaps, Layle reflected, Mr. Sobel thought it would be better for him not to wait too long.

Layle said, "Mr. Sobel, I know that I can trust you to have good enough judgment to take charge of the situation if my . . . illness should endanger the prisoner."

"Thank you, sir," Mr. Sobel murmured. "I don't see any need to do so at this point. Many of the torturers here prefer to continue searching prisoners, even at times of the year when their health is not the best. In most cases, they're able to carry out their duties."

"Yes?" said Layle, intrigued by this analogy. "Well, after all, any duty that is also a pleasure . . . What does this door lead to?" He pointed to the door that was next to Mr. Sobel's apartment door.

Mr. Sobel started, visibly startled by this change of topic. "Sir?"

"The door," Layle replied patiently. "Where does it lead to?" What was quite obvious was that it led to a space that was directly behind Layle's room. Layle had not managed to stay alive for three years in the Hidden Dungeon without taking care to check that nobody could enter his bedroom from any direction whatsoever.

Unless he was seducing them, of course.

Mr. Sobel hesitated. It was the hesitation that decided Layle. He tried the door, found that it was unlocked, and slid his way inside while Mr. Sobel was still trying to articulate a protest.

The stove and lamps in the room were unlit, but with the aid of the dim light from the corridor, Layle had no trouble seeing his surroundings. A quick look at the walls, ceilings, and floors assured him that there was no easy way to travel from this room to his own. And in any case – he thought, running his eye over the tables, the food bins, the jacket and vest folded over a chair, and the colorful framed posters on the wall – it was clear that this was a living space, not a workspace.

"My junior night guard lives here?" he said to Mr. Sobel. Odd how, after only three days, Layle had come to think of the High Torturer's guards as his own guards.

Mr. Sobel, who was still standing outside and had been saying something about the tradition of privacy in the Eternal Dungeon, stared at him.

Smiling slightly, Layle added, "You don't have much faith in my ability as a torturer to search for clues, do you?" He waved his hand toward the posters. "Theatrical scenes. I heard that my junior night guard liked the theater."

"Ah . . . yes, sir." Mr. Sobel looked visibly uncomfortable.

So Mr. Sobel did not like to gossip about people behind their backs? That was good to know. Taking pity on him, Layle withdrew from the apartment, closing the door behind him. "Will I receive the opportunity to speak to him soon?" he asked. It would be good to talk with someone in this art-forsaken land who knew the difference between a backstage and a forestage.

Mr. Sobel's mouth quirked. "Yes, sir. Quite soon."

Layle eyed him, wondering whether Mr. Sobel had faith in Layle's ability to break the prisoner quickly, or whether, instead, the guard had concluded that Layle was likely to fail to break his prisoner. Either way, it was likely that Layle would indeed have leisure time on his hands within a short while.

He resolutely turned his thoughts from what might come from the appointment with the healer.

o—o—o

"Layle," said the High Torturer, "how are matters going with your prisoner?"

Suppressing a sigh, Layle turned to face the High Torturer as Mr. Sobel paused to reprimand a guard who was sloppily dressed. Layle had noticed that, in the past three days, Mr. Sobel had become less and less inclined to overlook poor performance by the other guards or to accept backtalk from them. Some matters in this dungeon were changing for the better.

Other matters, on the other hand, remained tediously the same. Layle told the High Torturer curtly, "I've determined that he's lying to me, sir. I'm trying to determine now the exact nature of the falsehood."

"Bloody blades, man, we don't have this kind of time!" The High Torturer gripped hard the handle of the whip on his belt. "The Queen wants a report of progress by tomorrow. Tomorrow, do you understand?"

Layle was still a moment. Then he said, "Yes, sir. I'll have his confession by the end of my shift."

His statement caused the High Torturer to stare. "How can you be sure—?"

"By the end of my shift," Layle repeated flatly. "Now, if you will excuse me, sir . . ."

He turned away, very aware of the High Torturer's hand upon his whip, but too angry to heed the warning. Searching was not supposed to proceed like this – not in the Eternal Dungeon. The Code said that the torturer should take however long was needed to obtain a confession and a statement of repentance.

Well, perhaps if he obtained a confession quickly, he could persuade the High Torturer to let him spend a day or two more on his searching, helping the prisoner recognize his wrongdoing.

On the other hand, it was unlikely that the prisoner would be in any shape for thought if Layle had to proceed with his breaking that quickly. As Mr. Sobel came to join him at the door, Layle said to him, "I'm going to be making one last chance tonight to make the prisoner see reason."

Mr. Sobel flicked a glance at the departing High Torturer. "Yes, sir."

"That last chance will not be pleasant." With those words, Layle entered the breaking cell.

o—o—o

Breaking a prisoner by words alone was a skill he had learned when he first arrived at the Hidden Dungeon, at age fifteen. The young man who had taught him – Master Aeden's other apprentice – had been far more skilled at that form of searching than Layle would ever be. Layle's own native talents lay in physical torture, quickness of movement, keenness of eyesight and hearing, deception, and seduction. Nonetheless, he had done his best to learn what he could of this arcane skill of word-breaking, rarely

practiced in the Hidden Dungeon because the torturers there could use any instruments they wanted to break the prisoner.

Later, during his flight to Yclau, it had occurred to Layle that he had received perfect training for being a torturer in the Eternal Dungeon, whose Code encouraged the torturers to delay physical torture until all other methods of breaking had been exhausted.

Layle was beginning to think, though, that he would have shown greater mercy to this prisoner by placing him straight on the rack.

Layle paused to let Mr. Sobel hand the prisoner a handkerchief. The prisoner had thoroughly soaked his own handkerchief a while back; Layle made a mental note to carry an extra handkerchief at all times.

Mr. Sobel's expression had been one of uneasiness throughout the night's searching, perhaps because he knew that, if this searching failed, he would be the man to turn the wheel on the rack. He had ceased, however, to fiddle with the pistol in his pocket; apparently his conversation with Layle at midnight had reassured him that there would be no need to use the gun in order to protect the prisoner.

Though protecting the prisoner seemed a moot point now. Layle said in a mild voice, "You're making matters more difficult for yourself than they need to be."

By this time, the prisoner had come to know what Layle's mild voice meant; he flinched at this preparation for a new onslaught. "I'm telling you the truth, sir," he protested in a breathy manner, obviously trying to hold back sobs.

"I know you are. And I also know that you're holding back information. What work do you do?"

"I am employed by the Queen. I assist with any tasks my supervisor deems necessary—"

"—because you're a spoiled boy who never would have received a privileged post if it weren't for the fact that your foster father has influence?"

The prisoner bit his lip so hard that it bled. Layle's probing had uncovered Mr. Howard's underlying insecurity: his fear that he had no real skills at his current work, which had been chosen by his family rather than himself. The prisoner also keenly feared that his employer and his supervisor would recognize his worthlessness. Layle had continued to probe at that weak point, driving the prisoner into more and more despair. Hopefully, in time, the prisoner would begin to doubt his ability to hold out against Layle.

It appeared, though, that Mr. Howard had some inner reserve of strength connected with his searching, for after a moment he threw the handkerchief onto the floor defiantly, saying, "Maybe. And maybe after this is all through, I'll be sacked from my job. But that doesn't change the fact that I didn't do what I'm accused of doing."

"Don't be absurd," said Layle, still in his mild voice. "You were caught by the Queen herself."

"Who told you that? The High Torturer? And you trusted what he told you?"

For the first time in three days, Layle felt himself hesitate. It was an old trick, of course; the prisoner would accuse his accusers of lying, because that was the only way in which to escape the charges.

What made Layle hesitate was a memory of how many times in the Hidden Dungeon he had heard statements like that, and the statements had been true.

In the Hidden Dungeon, it did not matter whether a prisoner was actually innocent. The torturers were ordered to obtain a confession of guilt, no matter what. And here in the Eternal Dungeon . . . Here in the Eternal Dungeon, every prisoner questioned had already been determined guilty by other authorities.

But what if Layle's prisoner was innocent?

This was ridiculous. Mr. Howard was lying about something, probably something connected with his crime. And he was clearly trying to avoid answering the question about his work, which evidently was the key to the

evidence of his crime. "Very well," said Layle in a light voice that caused Mr. Howard to flinch again, "let me ask you a question that even you should find simple to answer. Look at me while you reply. Did you rape the Queen's niece?"

The prisoner looked him in the eye. In a steady, calm voice he said, "No, sir, I did not rape the Queen's niece. I have never met the Queen's niece. I have not committed a crime of any sort."

The cell was still. Mr. Sobel, who had been watching the proceedings with a troubled expression on his face, made a note in his memorandum book. Layle felt the blood pound in his body.

After a minute he said, "Mr. Howard, you will lie on the rack tonight."

The prisoner's knees gave way. Mr. Sobel managed to catch him in time and ease him into a sitting position on the bed-shelf.

"But I told you the truth!" The prisoner's cry rent the stillness.

"Then confess to a lesser crime. That is your only hope at this point." Layle signalled to Mr. Sobel, who hurried over to open the door. Mr. Howard buried his face in his hands.

Layle left the cell quickly and then stood stiffly as the senior night guard locked the door. The blood continued to pound through his body. Mr. Sobel, looking considerably shaken, turned toward him.

"Mr. Sobel," said Layle in a remarkably steady voice, "how soon can the rack room be ready?"

Mr. Sobel hesitated before saying, "Not before the day shift, sir. All of the rack rooms are in use at the moment."

"Then arrange for one to be assigned to the prisoner at the beginning of the next night shift, and explain to the High Torturer that the prisoner's confession has been delayed for that reason. I will have Mr. Howard's confession on the High Torturer's desk within the second hour of the beginning of tomorrow's night shift." This was being generous. From what Layle had seen, the prisoner would break within minutes, provided that Layle took him up to the highest levels of the rack immediately.

"Yes, sir," murmured Mr. Sobel. "May I have permission to stay with the prisoner for a while longer, in order to prepare him for his ordeal?" His troubled expression had increased, but he made no protest against Layle's orders.

He knows, thought Layle, feeling foul liquid enter his mouth from his throat. *He knows that the Code makes no provision for prisoners who are truly innocent.*

CHAPTER SIX

Layle sat sleepless, forlornly flipping through the Code, seeking a word that was not there.

The room was quiet. Mr. Sobel had not yet returned from the breaking cell, while the corridors in this part of the outer dungeon received few visits from the laborers and serving-women, much to Layle's relief. He turned another page as the lamp flickered, the flame guttering as it reached the end of the oil.

The words blurred in Layle's tired vision.

> When the prisoner arrives at the dungeon, he shall be placed in a breaking cell. His dignity as a human being must be recognized; he shall be provided with bedding and warmth and other such comforts as shall keep him in conditions no worse than that of his torturers . . .

Who had lied to Layle? The Queen? Had she delivered an innocent prisoner to the Eternal Dungeon for some political purpose, or out of petty revenge for some small harm done to her?

Or was it the Codifier? Had he delivered the Queen's message, and twisted it to seem as though the prisoner himself was the criminal, when in truth the Queen merely desired that the prisoner be questioned for evidence on who the true criminal was?

Or was the High Torturer the culprit, as the prisoner had implied? Had the High Torturer lied about the prisoner's guilt for his own reasons, as the High Master was accustomed to do from time to time? Had he believed that Layle was not skilled enough to know that the prisoner was telling the truth when he proclaimed his innocence?

Or perhaps the prisoner was Layle's test.

> The prisoner shall be searched within one day of his arrival, so that he shall not have to endure undue apprehension. He shall be questioned by a torturer, who may receive assistance from his

> guards. At all times, the prisoner shall be watched over by at least two guards . . .

Yes, that made the most sense. The prisoner was Layle's test. The High Torturer had deliberately given Layle a prisoner who was known to be innocent. The High Torturer wanted to see whether Layle had enough loyalty to follow the Code even under these circumstances.

And what difference did it make if Layle should rack the prisoner in order to obtain a false confession? No doubt the prisoner would be given some suitable reward afterwards for his suffering. But if Layle should refuse the High Torturer's orders . . .

> The torturer must keep in mind at all times the best interests of the prisoner. If the torturer searches a prisoner who has committed murder or rape, he shall proceed in the following fashion: He shall encourage the prisoner to offer a confession without compulsion. If this does not work, the torturer shall use whatever harsh words are necessary to break the prisoner. If the prisoner continues to remain obdurate, then, and only then, will the torturer resort to—

Layle stopped. His eye turned back to the beginning of the paragraph. "The torturer must keep in mind at all times the best interests of the prisoner. If the torturer searches a prisoner who has committed murder or rape . . ."

He stopped again. "If the torturer searches a prisoner who has committed murder or rape . . ."

"'If,'" he whispered aloud. "Not 'when.' 'If.' Oh, sweet blood."

It was the first time he had spoken an Yclau oath. He would recognize this later as the moment when he became Yclau.

o—o—o

The corpse in the Crematorium was gone. There was a label on a shelf with the corpse's name, but no candle was lit. Layle took a candle from its

box, lit the candle, and carried it over to stand behind the label for Mr. Longmire.

Then he stepped back, contemplating the prayer-candle. Contemplating the possibility that his own candle would stand on this shelf in a short time.

He had tried to sleep, hoping that rest would clear his mind. But over and over he had dreamt that he had seen the goddess Mercy, and he had tried to speak to her, but she had turned away from him, failing to recognize him as her faithful servant.

"Is this why you brought me to this dungeon?" he murmured to the goddess, staring at the candle. "Is death your grace?"

Perhaps it was. Perhaps Mercy was giving him the opportunity to die for the only good deed he would perform in his life.

And if he declined her gift, his life would return to evil. He thought of Mr. Sobel, lighting candles in the Crematorium, and he wondered what would become of the guard if Layle chose life rather than honor.

As far as the Code requires, and farther, if it is in keeping with the Code's principles. It had been a pledge, though he had not known it at the time.

He turned away. He was not quite good enough a man yet to sacrifice his life only for a prisoner he barely knew. But perhaps he was good enough a man to sacrifice his life, not only for the prisoner, but also in order to save the soul of a guard he had come to respect. Combined together, those two motives would have to suffice.

o—o—o

"Well?" said the High Torturer sharply. "Don't waste my time. Have you broken him?"

Layle took a deep breath. "It all depends on what you define as broken, sir."

"Don't turn the scholar on me, young man," the High Torturer replied in an irritated voice. "Have you beaten him? Racked him? Done *any* of the things you were hired to do?"

"I beat him when he was insolent to me, but—"

"But? *But?*" The High Torturer rose from behind his desk, leaning onto the desk with his fists. "Give me a straightforward answer: Have you made him give you his confession?"

He met the High Torturer's eyes then. He felt a strange sort of calm – the same sort of calm he had felt on the day that Master Aeden placed him on the rack, and he had known that all was lost. "No, sir," he said quietly. "I believe that he's innocent."

The loudest sound in the High Torturer's office was the hiss of the lamp-flame feeding on its oil. The High Torturer said, in a very soft voice, "I will give you one more chance. Will you, or will you not, carry out your duty?"

"No, sir." He heard his voice as though from a long distance away. "I won't torture anyone whom I know to be innocent. Never again."

The High Torturer's unforgiving gaze was as heavy as a pressing-stone upon him. Then the High Torturer sat down. "Leave," he said.

"Sir," he said, trying to keep desperation from his voice, "the *Code of Seeking* says—"

"I know what the Code says. Leave this office."

The High Torturer was no longer looking up from the papers on his desk. Layle departed, before he should attempt something suicidally stupid, like telling the High Torturer that he was wrong in his interpretation of the Code.

Outside, he leaned back against the High Torturer's door, his eyes closed as he tried to think. Surely, if the High Torturer planned to torture him or kill him or merely throw him in a life prison, he would have given orders for Layle's immediate arrest. Or had he decided that the young torturer was so monumentally stupid that Layle would passively await such punishment?

As, in fact, he would. Layle opened his eyes and contemplated the scene before him. In the three days since he had arrived, matters in the entry hall had gradually settled back to normal. With nobody willing to back Layle's

efforts, the guards and torturers had gradually returned to their idle gossip, their idleness of mind. The Record-keeper – one of the few men in the dungeon who showed any diligence in his work – had returned to struggling alone to keep up with the tide of documentwork, while nearby, a group of impressionable young guards watched their elders gambling their hours away.

"Oh, High Torturer," murmured Layle. "This dungeon could be so much better than it is. How can I make you see that?"

He stood for a long time, watching the business of the dungeon continue. The Record-keeper turned a page, a prisoner arrived under escort, the Record-keeper questioned his escort, the prisoner was handed over to dungeon guards, the prisoner was taken to the breaking cells, the Record-keeper wrote down his name and cell number on the slate tablet . . .

Beyond this image, for some reason, Layle's thoughts failed to go. He had never been one to ignore instinct. Turning to face the tablet, he carefully read all the names there. Failing to find the one he sought, he read it again. Then he looked thoughtfully at the Record-keeper.

No, on second thought, he would not ask the Record-keeper, who might feel duty-bound to lie to him. So might Mr. Sobel. There was one man – and one man only – who could answer his question truthfully.

The cell door was deserted this time; no day guards stood outside. Layle had no key to enter the cell, but that had never stopped him from entering any place he wished to go. He managed to jigger the lock without his tampering being noticed by the other guards in the corridor.

The prisoner was where Layle had left him, sitting on his bed-shelf, stripped of his jacket and vest, talking to Mr. Sobel. He broke off as Layle entered; both men turned to look at him and then rose to their feet.

Both looked highly apprehensive. It was quite clear, from their expressions, that they believed that Layle was here to take the prisoner to the rack room.

So, that much of what had occurred in this cell had been true.

If nothing else.

"Mr. Howard," said Layle, "there is one question I forgot to ask you – one very important question."

"Yes, sir?" The prisoner sounded puzzled.

"Are you my junior night guard?"

A smile slowly spread across Mr. Howard's face. He turned toward Mr. Sobel. "You win. I owe you a week's pay."

Mr. Sobel returned the smile. "You ought not to take wagers when the odds are that high against you."

o—o—o

The Hidden Dungeon had never been known for its cuisine. Whatever other grumbles that the Vovimian people might make against their royal dungeon, nobody had ever complained that the torturers there ate much better than their prisoners.

Layle, poking half-heartedly at the rich pastry of his midnight meal, did not look up at the other inhabitants of the dungeon's entry hall. He knew already what expressions were turned toward him. Gradually, as the days had passed, the initial mockery toward him had shifted, in an ominous manner, toward fear and anger. First there had been his attack on Mr. Longmire in the entry hall; then there had been his brutality toward the High Torturer's junior night guard in the dungeon corridor; then Mr. Longmire had been arrested and executed, mere hours after speaking to Layle; then rumors had begun to fly about Layle's assault on the Queen's guards . . .

. . . and now, somehow or other, the tale had spread of his moments of unawareness. Nobody knew for certain what Layle Smith's glazed looks meant, but everyone was prepared to speculate.

The whispers, hostile and malicious, continued around him. Across the table from him, Mr. Sobel leaned back in his chair to accept a light from a passing guard.

"Still minding the baby?" The guard cast a venomous look at Layle as he lit Mr. Sobel's cigarette. "Can't you join us in our game, then?" He shook

the dominoes in his free hand.

Mr. Sobel glanced quickly at Layle before saying, "Maybe tomorrow, Harry. Save a place for me."

The guard snorted and passed on. Mr. Sobel, reaching for his cup of rum, said in a low voice to Layle, "I wouldn't let all the talk worry you, sir. Underneath those bloody grumbles, you'll find that some of the men here respect what you're—"

He dashed the cup from Mr. Sobel's hand.

The silence in the entry hall was as complete as on the first day of Layle's arrival. Mr. Sobel stared down at the rum, which had splattered onto his uniform and had drowned his lit cigarette. Then he looked up, with an expression on his face that was so blank that even Layle could not interpret it.

Layle had spent the last few hours contemplating images of his idiocy: The day guards, missing from their post, surprised to receive a rebuke from Mr. Sobel. Mr. Sobel, luring Layle from the prison cell that was empty because the junior day guard had spent all night assisting with Mr. Longmire's arrest. Mr. Sobel, declining to return to his rooms, because he and Layle might pass the junior night guard on his way back from changing out of his uniform.

The High Torturer, informing Mr. Sobel that "all was ready" in the prisoner's cell.

Layle had risked torture, he had risked death, he had shown himself faithless to the High Torturer and the Codifier and even the Queen. He had thrown away his only chance to work in the Eternal Dungeon. And he had done all this, not in order to save a prisoner's life, not in order to save Mr. Sobel's soul, and not even because he loved the Code more than his life. No, he had sacrificed what he most wanted, simply because he was so much a dullard that he had allowed himself to be *tricked*.

Since his time with the Queen, Layle had never been so close to tears. But it seemed that a certain role was expected of him here. Very well; if

everyone in this dungeon considered him to be a dangerous rebel, let him be a dangerous rebel.

He rose to his feet. Looming over the High Torturer's guard, he said in a clear voice that reached to all corners of the entry hall, "Mr. Sobel, I have no doubt that my work time with you will be short. But as long as you remain working under me, you will not drink, you will not gamble, you will not smoke, you will not curse, you will not address other men informally while on duty – in short, you will act in a manner that demonstrates respect for the principles put forth by the *Code of Seeking*. Whatever anyone else in this dungeon may do, I will *not* allow the purity of the Code to be tainted by a guard who has been placed under my command. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir." Mr. Sobel's voice was as denuded of emotion as his face. His eyes flicked to something over Layle's shoulder. "Excuse me, please." Grabbing a napkin with which to wipe his uniform, he slipped from his seat.

Not bothering to see what excuse Mr. Sobel had used for his departure, Layle sat down and begin poking listlessly at his food again as the vicious whispers returned with greater force. So, he had lost his last ally – if Mr. Sobel had ever been an ally. Layle was now officially the most despised man in the Eternal Dungeon.

Which, after all, was no more than he deserved. He felt his jacket pocket to be certain that the *Code of Seeking* was still there, and resolutely turned his mind from all lingering, wistful thoughts of what he had done before his arrival in the Queendom of Yclau.

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"Well?" said the High Torturer.

Seward Sobel was too well trained to shift in place, but he did not quite meet the High Torturer's eyes. "Well, sir, I would say that you have allowed into this dungeon a firebrand. He dislikes the customs here, dislikes the regular methods of searching, dislikes how the Code is applied . . . and has every intention of fighting anyone in this dungeon who refuses to adhere to what he deems to be the Code's 'purity.'"

"And he has won your loyalty," observed the High Torturer, leaning back in his chair.

Seward Sobel, never a man to directly lie, dropped his gaze and said nothing. The High Torturer glanced over at the Codifier, who was leaning back in his own chair behind his desk. "Any further questions, Josh?"

The Codifier shook his head. "You may go," he told the guard.

The guard, reserving a final, apologetic look for the High Torturer, made his exit. The High Torturer waited until he was gone before saying, "Well!"

"Aptly put." The Codifier contemplated the book under his fingers. "I would have thought the cycle of time would end before that exceedingly faithful guard of yours would switch his loyalties elsewhere."

"He is dangerous," said the High Torturer, not speaking of his guard.

"He is indeed. He passed the test you set for him: he refused to torture an innocent prisoner . . . and even proved to be skilled enough to strip your courageous junior night guard of his well-acted disguise. So what will you do with him?"

The High Torturer shrugged wearily. "What else can I do? You know the position we're in, Josh. Even before Abe Longmire was fool enough to flaunt his misdeeds in the presence of my senior night guard, you and I had realized that neither Longmire nor any other torturer in this dungeon possessed the skill and integrity to be trusted with *that*." He pointed to the book in the Codifier's hands.

The Codifier nodded. "Twenty years ago, you revised this book, removing the worst of its past errors. In five or ten years, we must select another man to take on the same task of bringing the Code up to date – but *him*?" There was a genuine note of query in his voice.

"Him," replied the High Torturer flatly. "If we survive so long. Josh, Layle Smith may be the Eternal Dungeon's savior . . . or he may destroy our dungeon."

The suggestion of a smile appeared on the Codifier's face. "You were ever a gambler."

The High Torturer sighed. "And now my gambling days are over. Curse it, I always enjoyed a good game of whist." He raised his hand to his head, and as he did so, his own smile appeared. "I suppose," he said to the Codifier, "that I will have to get used to addressing you as Mr. Daniels."

He pulled down the face-cloth of his hood.

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=== Upcoming fiction ===

SWEET BLOOD
Excerpt

The main corridor in the Eternal Dungeon was cold. It was always cold; he had never known it to be otherwise. The prisoners received the comfort of heating in their cells, and presumably the Seekers did as well, though D. Urman had never lingered long enough in a Seeker's cell to find out. Guards such as himself shivered in autumnal temperatures year-round.

The corridor was also dark, lit only by a minimum of electric lamps that cast shadow-palls over the prisoner they escorted. Few guards were present in the corridor; the High Seeker had stripped the inner dungeon of all but the skeleton crew of the dusk-shift guard, forcing every other guard and Seeker to watch the coming event.

Mr. Urman – addressed that way by friend and foe alike in the stiltedly formal setting of the Eternal Dungeon – would just as soon have taken his annual leave this week. It wasn't as though he had never seen a punishment before. He had administered many himself, quelling murderous prisoners into obedience or brutalizing innocent prisoners – whatever his Seekers demanded of him, he had done. But today's punishment, everyone agreed, would be like none that the dungeon had seen for many decades. Mr. Urman wished that he had his prisoner's courage to rebel against orders.

They reached the closed door at the south end of the corridor, which lay closest to the great gates above the dungeon. The prisoner – walking unbound between his escort – halted abruptly before the door. His breath and heartbeat were rapid; his skin was bleached clean of color. Mr. Sobel, senior night guard to the High Seeker, frowned on the other side of the prisoner. Like Mr. Urman, he had seen many a prisoner faint in his bonds. This prisoner looked as though he would not get as far as the place of his punishment before his knees gave way.

Mr. Urman thought this was eminently sensible of him. "Look," he said roughly to the prisoner, keeping his voice low enough that he would not be overheard by any of the guards they had recently passed, "you don't have to go through with this. You can still ask for the other sentence to be passed."

Mr. Boyd's mouth twisted into something not quite a smile. He did not look in the direction of Mr. Urman; his attention was on the door. "Take the path of my late prisoner, you mean?"

"It's suicide either way!" His voice was too loud; Mr. Sobel shot him a look, and Mr. Urman quickly lowered his tone. "Mr. Boyd, you know that you're going to die either way. The High Seeker is determined to have his revenge on you for helping a prisoner escape from his cruelty. The only question is how long it will take you to die. Why let the High Seeker have his extra pleasure at your lingering death? Are you some sort of masochist?"

Mr. Sobel winced, but he made no effort to cut the conversation short. No doubt he had been making similar pleas to Mr. Boyd in the hours leading up to this moment; he and Mr. Boyd had been the closest of friends since Barrett Boyd was first appointed a guard in the Eternal Dungeon.

Mr. Urman half expected Mr. Boyd to make some joke, perhaps in reference to Elsdon Taylor. But Mr. Boyd, staring at the door, simply said, "No."

"Then why satisfy his sadism?" Mr. Urman demanded. "For love of the Code, don't you know what kind of flogging you'll receive in there? By the time the High Seeker is through with you, your back will be nothing but

strips of flesh hanging from bone, while your life's blood puddles on the __"

"Mr. Urman." Mr. Sobel's quiet voice held a distinct note of warning. Mr. Urman shut his mouth. Too late, he saw that Mr. Boyd had paled further to the color of curd.

The imprisoned guard turned his face slowly toward Mr. Urman. His face was slick with sweat. His eyes seemed glazed over, like a dead man's. He said, in carefully spaced words, "If I allowed myself to be hanged quietly . . . If I allowed Layle Smith to take me discreetly away and execute me in a room far away from any eyewitness . . . How would matters change in the Eternal Dungeon?"

Mr. Urman started to speak, stopped, and tried to think of the right words to say.

"They would not change." Mr. Boyd's voice was unusually hard now. "Matters didn't change after the High Seeker murdered Mr. Ferris through a sentence of hanging. The High Seeker executed the senior-most Seeker in this dungeon for a small disobedience, and nothing happened except that people here grumbled a bit for a day or two. If I allowed myself to be hanged – quickly, painlessly, privately – then the High Seeker would be free to continue in the murderous path he has chosen. Only by making this execution public – only by allowing the High Seeker to exercise his sadism on me in front of others – can I have any hope that the other inhabitants of this dungeon will be shocked into an awareness that they are being governed by a man who is engaging in behavior which is as vindictive and vicious as that of any of the criminals we are supposed to be guarding the Queendom of Yclau against." Mr. Boyd took a deep breath before adding, "This is the only way in which I can make the High Seeker himself aware of what he has become. Mr. Urman, Layle Smith's soul is as much in danger right now as that of any unrepentant criminal."

Mr. Urman struggled for a reply, but Mr. Boyd had already turned away from him. "Let's get this over with," Mr. Boyd said in a flat voice, "while I still have enough courage left to do this."

And with those words, he opened the door and walked into his execution chamber.

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=== Back matter ===

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The Eternal Dungeon: 2010 edition in October 2010 (e-book editions, under the title *The Eternal Dungeon Omnibus*); reprint with minor changes in July 2011 (e-book editions, under the title *The Eternal Dungeon: a Turn-of-the-Century Toughs omnibus of historical fantasy novels*).

Somewhat different versions of "Barbarians" and "Hidden" were originally published in the May 2003 issue of *MAS-Zine*.

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